Switchback home news issues submit craft reviews serviews

Rising

Issue 18, Volume 9

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents Alex M. Frankel

Philip Kobylarz City as Mistress

Christopher Linforth Narrativized

> Michael Nagel December Notes

Poetry

Heather Angier Anger

Maggie Blake Topography

John F. Buckley and Martin Ott The Mermaid Behind the Glass

Rebecca Morgan Frank Manuals for Trains

Kenneth E. Harrison, Jr. Signs of a Struggle

Michael Lauchlan Coyote

F. Daniel Rzicznek from Leafmold

Noah Siela MPG of Wild Boar

Dillon J. Welch For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Fiction

Cezarija Abartis Charon

Janet Benton Instructions for Failure

lan Breen Conway Rides

Jessica Langan-Peck Recovery and Rehabilitation

Peter Obourn No More Nickernackin'

Kayla Rae Whitaker Specifics of Hell

Art

Dmitry Borshch Daughters of the Dust



Leah Givens To the Sun

Margarita Gokun A Journey

Margarita Gokun Manifestation

Pete Madzelan Taking Flight

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

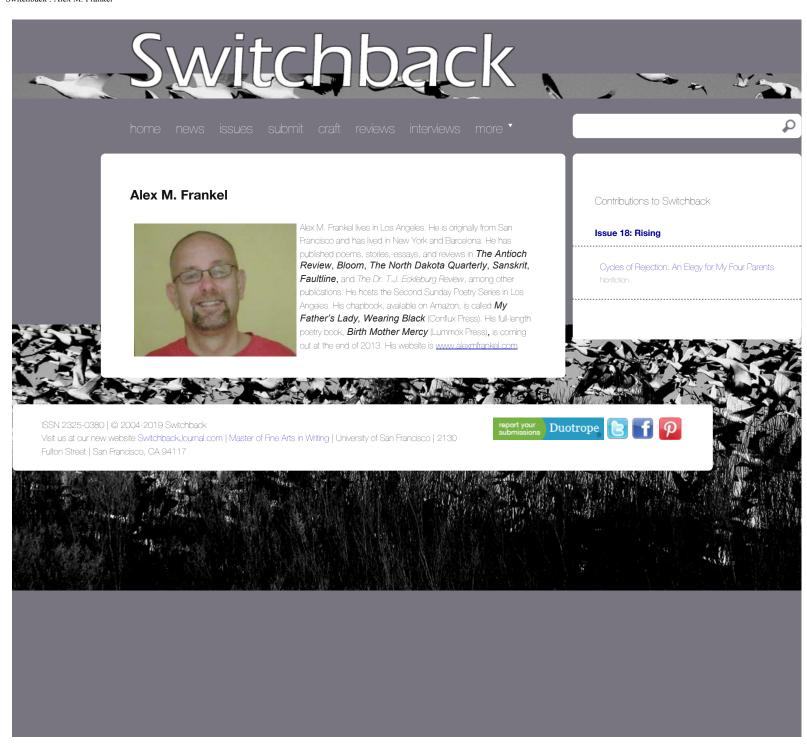
Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117













Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

I found out who I was on a bleak summer day in San Francisco when a large envelope arrived from an adoption lawyer. I was almost thirty years old. I opened the envelope and pulled out a picture of a pretty teenage girl who looked like me. This was my mother. I have since learned to call her my Obirth mother. O I must back up, though; I must go back to the beginning to chronicle how I arrived at the discovery of my real kin.

My adoptive parents, Henry and Vera Frankel, were not able to have children of their own, nor did they adopt anyone else after me. I was an only child raised in San Francisco in the foggy area near the beach. My parents were two decades older than everyone else sparents and were often taken for my grandparents. They spoke English with a thick German accent (which I didn'ot notice or hear) and, because I was very attached to them and had few friends, they passed this accent onto me. Although it is a bit less noticeable now than it was years ago, Iom still sometimes asked about the peculiar way I speak.

My parents were strict and traditional, more German than Jewish. Besides Hanukkah and the High Holidays they hardly turned to their religion at all. My mother, Vera, was well-liked and warm-hearted, but she was also rigid and puritanical andiNthough she never told me this in so many wordsiNddnÖt like the idea of me having friends. I know that, in her nonphysical, overprotective way, she adored me. When school was out, I had to come home right away and was never allowed to bring other children orfNeaven forbidfNgo over to another child house spontaneously without days of formalities and negotiations. She was born in Hamburg and, after escaping Nazi Germany and spending a decade in Mexico, migrated to San Francisco in the late Ó40s. She came from a wealthy family of Jewish merchants. Sigmund Freud appears in a remote branch of her family tree, and in Mexico she knew Otto Klemperer. Together with my father, she trained me to love classical music; nothing else was acceptable or decent. She smoked heavily and the house smelled of her cigarettes; no one knew about passive smoking in those days. She longed for Germany and Mexico and seemed to live in an earlier era. When I was a teenager in the Ó70s, she still wore gloves any time she went out. We lived near Haight Ashbury and the Castro, but we might as well have been stranded on our own island miles out at sea.

My father, Henry, was like her in many ways: rigid, high-strung, behind the timesÑa Holocaust sun/wor badly scarred on the inside. I still have some of his documents from the Third Reich era, and IÖm looking at them and touching them as I type these words. I see his ÖKennkarte, Ó or ID card, issued by the ÖDeutsches Reich, Ó with a big Gothic letter ÖJÓ for Jew on the front. It is a brittle two-page booklet made from a kind of cloth. It has three stamps with eagles and swastikas, two fingerprints, the signature ÖHeinz Israel FraenkelÓ (all Jewish males were forced to take the middle name ÖlsraelÓ) and an unsmiling black-and-white image of my fatherÑwhom I only knew when he was heavy and oldÑas a slender youth of eighteen. Heinz Israel FraenkelÖs Kennkarte has an oldbook smell to it; it is a piece of history I can touch and handle right here at my desk, and it evokes the same kind of fascination and wonder I felt when I noticed an old womanÖs tattooed concentration camp number still visible on her forearm while she was relaxing in the California sun half a century after the war ended.

My father was born in Berlin and fled with his family to Shanghai, where he lived in poverty for the duration of the war. When he settled in San Francisco, he went into the export business. My parents met in the early 050s. Unlike my mother, he was an angry, bad-tempered, dishonest person, with no friends of his own. Having known hunger in China, he had an inordinate craving for rich food and comfort, and always insisted on the most expensive

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work Next Work >

Page 1 of 6 >>

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylara

Narrativized

Ohristopher Linforth

December Notes

Michael Nage

Poetry

Fiction

French restaurants and the fanciest five-star hotels. He was not a kind man; he didnŌt like people and they didnŌt like him. My parents were not happily married. What I remember most about them was their fights.

They fought constantly. And when I say ÖfoughtÓ I donÖt just mean they quarreled. They shouted and they threw plates and knives and they kicked, hit, and slapped. Fights would sometimes go on for entire evenings. A fight could start in one part of the house and my parents would work their way from room to room with their accusations and recriminations. The dogs hid under the beds; I wanted to hide with them but I couldnÖt fit. I tried to stop my parents. I ran between them and begged them to stop; but they wouldnÖt stop. The worst fight happened when I was about eight. In the middle of the night, I was woken up by the sound of breaking glass. I ran into my parentsÖ room and saw my father with blood on his face and glass all over his pajamas and the sheets. My mother, fed up with his shouting and meanness, had thrown an ashtray at him. So in the fog and the peace of the Sunset District, my family had its own *Kristallnacht*. For days he went around with a Band-Aid on his nose and for days there was silence in the house.

I believed Nas children often do Nthat I was to blame for this violence. I believed I was bad and all the fights were a punishment by OGodO (as I imagined him) for trying to be tough and assertive, like the other boys. I was not good-looking or athletic or tough or popular or cool. I was called a Osissy, O though the harsher taunting came a few years later, in junior high, when I was bullied and called OfaggotO and OFI the French Poodle. O Sometimes, in elementary school, I made efforts to be a boy, but every time I did, I felt the wrath of God strike the house in the form of Mami and Deddy shouting and hitting and kicking each other in front of me.

123456>>





Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

After the night of broken glass, I heard some strange news. It happened during one of the few visits I was allowed to make to another boyos house. Jeffrey Smith had a new sister; sheod been adopted and this was known to everybody. I looked down at the baby in the crib and made a remark about her adoption (itos too long ago now for me to remember the exact remark: did I show curiosity? pity? maybe contempt?). Jeffrey pointed at me: OYou were adopted, toolo At home I asked my parents. They seemed unprepared for this; how many years had they been planning to keep the secret from me? OYes, O they said, Oit is true. Your mother couldnot keep you. She wanted the best for you O I asked them if she was Jewish. My father said yes and, at the same time, my mother said no.

Strange as it may seem to non-adoptees, for the next twenty years I had little curiosity about my origins. Even though I knew that I was not my parentsÖ biological son, I had such a strong belief in the power of ÖnurtureÓ that it seemed irrelevant who the egg and sperm donors were. I was the work of Henry and Vera Frankel: my femininity, introversion, German accent, and uncoolness had been programmed by them. At the same time, I had an idealized picture of what I might have turned out to be if my birth mother had kept me: hip, strong, popular, straight, and very American. I had an image of myself sitting on the stoop of some tenement building (itÖs common for adoptees to believe in the poverty of their blood kin) without shirt or shoes or socks, hanging out with the boys, accepted by the boys. I was convinced that whoever my creators were, they would have raised me in a

I didliNonce in a whileNhave daydreams about how the biological son or daughter of Henry and Vera Frankel would have looked and acted. The picture I used to form in my mind was not unlike the black-and-white ID photo of my father at eighteen: dark, bespectacled, quiet, reserved. The outside didniOt look like me, but on the inside I tried every day to be the sonNor maybe daughterNithey might have made with their bodies.

I also had daydreams about the hundreds, the thousands, that Henry and Vera might have adopted instead of me: regardless of these children Os genetic makeup, whether born in Siberia or Patagonia, they would all Nif raised by Henry and Vera Nhave turned into me.

When I looked around me at the other boys and girls, I made the assumption that everyone had two sets of parents: there were the reckless young people whose bodies produced you, and there were the older, more serious people who took responsibility for you when you emerged from the womb.

As I grew into adolescence, the fights at home became less frequent and violent; by my late teens my father had other women on the side. My mother knew about these affairs, which he didnot try hard to hide, and was bitter and despondent. Once we drove to Santa Cruz on a day trip and the atmosphere in the car was tense and toxic. When we got to the boardwalk, she said to him, OHere you can find them cheapló

She was diagnosed with lung cancer a few months later, and by the middle of the next year, after much useless surgery and radiation, there was no longer any hope. She sat in an armchair in the bedroom and an Irish nurse took care of her. People came to visit, mostly German Jews. I was twenty and had begun to have my first encounters (not relationships) with young men. I was childish enough to believe that my motherÖs illness was somehow GodÖs punishment: I had dared to assert my sexuality. The moment her last breath came, I broke down and held her hand and smelled her smell, and the Irish nurse said, ÖNo, be a manlÓ Then she made the sign of the cross over my motherÕs body.

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

Nonfiction

<< Page 2 of 6 >>

Oycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents Alex M. Frankel

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylarz

Narrativized

Ohristopher Linforth

December Notes

Michael Nage

Poetry

Fiction

A few days after this, my father introduced me to his German stewardess girlfriend. I watched them hold hands by a swimming pool in a lovely suburb. On our way back from that visit to his woman, I asked about my birth parents for maybe the first time in ten years. ÖYour biological father, Ó he said, Òwas a professor with a high IQ. Your biological mother was very young. When we went into the hospital room to visit her, she was reading The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich.Ó

In my twenties, not long after I graduated from Columbia, I decided to move to Spain. My hair was somewhat long in the back. My father said, ÖYou mean to say you intend to look for work as a teacher with such hair? Ó And he took out a pair of scissors and forced me down on the bathtub to cut my hair. I was twenty-three.

My parents had taken me on overseas trips and lÕd always fantasized about living in Europe. Spain held a particular fascination for me. I arrived in Barcelona eager to start a new foreign life and work as a teacher. My philosophy degree from Columbia was absurd (I loved philosophizing, but I didnÕt love formal logic or turgid proselÑ why hadnÕt I majored in English?) and for a year lÕd worked as a proofreader in an accounting firm for minimum wage. Now I inhaled the beautiful, polluted air of Barcelona, and maybe I could teach and maybe I could find love. By this time lÕd had a huge number of quick partnerslÑwho knows the exact countlÑmostly in New York City. I loved the anonymity and brutality of the St. MarkÕs Baths and the Club Baths and the Anvil and the Mineshaft and Alex in Wonderland. Those were the days just before the AIDS epidemic was thrust into public consciousness as never before by the death of Rock Hudson. I imagined there was no AIDS in Spain.

One night at the best bathhouse in the world, BarcelonaÖs Thermas, I collided with a youth named JosŽ Luis. We were together for a month. I loved him because he was younger than me and could ride a motorcycle and ski. I loved him because he was dark, tough, and immature. I loved him, most of all, because he didnÖt love me back. He was on the down low and said this explained why he couldnÖt make too much time for me. One night he said, Öl warn you, I just get bored,Ó and later that night in bed as I was running my lips down his leg I recalled those words and they turned me on in a way that a declaration like Öl love you and need youÓ never

Josž Luis left me after a few weeks; I couldnÔt (wouldnÔt) let him go and blamed myself: I had driven him away! I went back to Thermas every night and found youths who might help heal the loss (some charged for this), but they were impostors: they couldnÔt replace the beautiful one whoÔd been lost. I started drinking, even in the morning (and lÔm not a drinker). I listened to Rachmaninoff day and night; in his lush music I found comfort, but no answers. Instead of eating or sleeping I walked the streets of Barcelona and ruminated. One day on the sidewalk, as stress was building up inside me, I saw a dead animal. IÔm still not sure what it was, a rat? cat? The body was half-demolished, but the eyes looked into mine and I recoiled; I was so startled I may even have shrieked. Of course I couldnÔt see my own reaction, but I noticed a man watching me as he sat in his parked car. His face showed surprise and concern, and a kind of naked, child-like curiosity and expressiveness that you rarely see beyond the Mediterranean countries. I have never forgotten the animal cadaver or the way my anguishNmy breakdownNwas reflected in a strangerÔs face.

I began sessions with a psychoanalyst. For the first time I could talk to someone about the fights at home, about being bullied, about losing my mother, about my father os abusiveness, about my insatiable need for bad boys, about rejection when I submitted my short stories to literary magazines. I barely mentioned being adopted, but during the first few months of this therapy my psychoanalyst said to me, Oyour parents owns were Oyour birth mother couldnot keep you, obut the message you heard was, Oshe didnot want me. That was the original rejection."

I had never given much thought to my birth parents, and the incident with Jeffrey Smith (ÖYou were adopted, toolÓ) was, in fact, a memory retrieved only during sessions of psychoanalysis. It had never occurred to me that I might one day want to track down the two youngsters responsible for my birth. I had always assumedlÑas adoptees tend to, I believeÑthat my real parents would rebuff any attempt to contact them and that the door would be permanently shut in my face. But several years later, on a visit back to San Francisco, I thought I might try to discover who I really was. I figured I just wanted to know the genealogy. Was I Dutch? When I looked in the mirror I somehow thought I might be Dutch.

I was almost thirty. My father, at seventy, was vigorous and curmudgeonly. One morning at breakfast I





Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

I saw the photo of my birth mother: black-and-white image of a 1950s cheerleader with my face. My lost face. This wasnOt right. None of this. Once long ago this stranger and I were bundled into one person! I read through the notes put together by a social worker: Marcia Cranston; from Auburn, California; twenty years old; Roman Catholic; Ocannot care for a child at this timeO; Frank Verges; from East Moline, Illinois; graduate student in philosophy; twenty-four years old; Opleasant featuresO; Greek American; Greek Orthodox faith. There were photographs; there were birth and death certificates of my OgrandparentsO; there was even my original birth certificate: I had been given the provisional name ODavid Verges.O

There had always been, for me, two worlds: one was the narrow, repressed, old-fashioned world of Henry and Vera Frankel; the other was the free, sensual, hip, young world of normal people, who spoke real American and played sports and let their boys unbutton the top buttons of their shirts or even take off their shirts when it got hot. I didn'Ot like the person l'Od become. True, I was now more confident about my looks than I had been when I was younger, but I didn'Ot like anything else. I was shy, unathletic, and had bad posture. I was a weighty, unwelcome presence at social gatherings. I clung to the belief that I would have turned out completely different if l'Od been raised by my real parents. And all these documents now seemed to back up what l'Od always suspected: my birth parents came from a better world, the world of my classmates, a kind of middle American paradise.

I showed the papers to my father. ÖlÖm happy for you, Ó he said, Öbut lÖm sad. What Mami and I tried to give you, the trips to Europe and the luxuries and the fine restaurants and the private schools! And now I see how much does come from the genes!\did you see he studied philosophy just like you?\did

As soon as I returned to Barcelona I went to the library of the American Institute and asked if there was a directory of college instructors. If my birth father had been studying philosophy in 1960, wasnot there a good chance he was still teaching it? Within a few minutes I saw my birth father on same, Frank Verges, and the address of the institution where he worked. I began composing a letter when I got home. I needed more than old photos, notes and legal documents. My letter was well-written and silly and pompous. I think I may have said, Oyou and Marcia, after thirty years of my exile, are now retrieved from my unconscious. Do you know why she did what she did? O I have my letter somewhere but I donot care to look at it. I finished the letter and mailed it. Oyou donot know what you may stir up, O my father Henry said sternly on the phone when I told him what IOd done.

A week later Frank Verges phoned me.

The solemn new voice from Southern California spoke slowly and chose his words carefully. ÖYou sound so AmericanlÓ I said to him. (Since I grew up speaking mostly German at home, English has always seemed like a cold language to me; I still feel alienated from it.) ÖMarcia, Ó he told me during our long talk, Öwas the most beautiful person. What happened thirty years ago was not her fault. The blame rests on my shoulders. Ó And he said, Ölőve been waiting for you. Ó

I am trying to get past clichŽs to describe how the phone call felt. Like a dreamNyes. SurrealNyes. It was like the moment of seeing my birth motherOs photoNit was like trespassingNike hearing some news that is too momentous to be believed. I give up. I donOt think such a moment can be described in prose. Maybe not even in poetry. It was a naked moment; I cried (as I had when I saw MarciaOs picture) and so did he. It was like peeling off

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work
<< Page 3 of 6 >>

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents Alex M. Frankel

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylarz

Narrativized

Ohristopher Linforth

December Notes

Michael Nage

Poetry

Fiction

layers, peeling off years of lies and pretending, years of Henry and Vera and Barcelona and foreignness, to suddenly get at the real, the authentic, the primal.

I wanted to live this new chapter intensely; I wanted Neven consciously Nto erase the past and start from the beginning, from infancy, with my real kin. But no one was particularly interested in going along this path with me.

My philosopher father Frank, believing my ÖllteraryÓ letter to him deserved a ÖllteraryÓ response, wrote to me after we spoke on the phone. Here is part of what he had to say:

I was not trying to be chivalrous by attempting to shield Marcia from blame in our first telephone conversation. I was a second-year graduate student, she was a first-year undergraduate who respected my learning. In those days, thirteen years before abortion was legalized in the United States, the overwhelming majority of middle-class women did the same thing Marcia did. They would go live in some city or environment where they were not very well known, carry the pregnancy through to its completion, and make the best possible arrangements that they could in order for the child to be adopted by loving and caring parents. Marcia was living in a room on California Street when I visited her in the summer of 1960. She took the California Street cable car to work. We did not argue when I visited her in San Francisco. We were polite, but I was incapable, at the time, of summoning the appropriate intensity of emotional support that she obviously needed. I was too preoccupied with my own graduate studies to consider marriage. For some years following that experience I would be moved to tears whenever I recalled how preoccupied I was with my own emotional and sexual hang-ups during that visit with Marcia. I have always hoped that the pregnancy did not leave her with emotional scars that would haunt her for the rest of her life. But then how could that experience not have profoundly influenced her, just as it has obviously profoundly affected both you and me, and (may God forgive me) perhaps you more than me?

After all those years it only took my birth father a few days to track down my birth mother: his hunch about where she might be living turned out to be right. Marcia had left the mainland and moved to Hawaii not long after she gave me up for adoption. In Hawaii she married a Filipino and adopted two Hawaiian children. She never gave birth again after she had me. Now, in 1990, she was divorced and alone, as was my birth father. Marcia wrote to me but sent these letters to Frank, who forwarded them to me, since at first she didn'ôt want me to know her address. She wrote:

Lately lÖve been feeling guilty about things that never caused guilt before. I just last week finally got a grip on myself and decided to stop this nonsense. Alex, I believe that I am more vulnerable to you than to anyone else in the world and I will not allow you to use that vulnerability against me. I donŌt want there to be an ÒagainstÓ in this relationship. If weŌre not ÒforÓ ourselves and each other, then thereŌs no point in it. There is a whole range of negative feelings going on here from each one of us toward the other two: anger, guilt, resentment, etc. We canŌt ignore them, we probably have to express them, but the point of doing that (gruesome) exercise must be to move beyond into something better.

Nine days later she wrote:

IOm looking forward to our meeting at Christmas time, though I surely donOt know what good it will do you. One thing that I want to make clear to you so that you give up any hope of hearing a fairy tale is that in 1960 I did not want a baby. If Frank had offered to marry me or OkeepO me, I would certainly have given my best shot at being a mother. Given the fact that both he and I were a little flaky, it probably would have been a disaster. In any case, once pregnant, I did want to at least give you what I couldNilfe. Another point I want to make is that it was not you I didnOt want. It was any baby. I liked that baby I carried in meNto me it was the ideal baby. And I was quite content that other people were to bring you up. I thought they were lucky to get you.

<< 1 2 **3** 4 5 6 >>



ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website Switchback-Journal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117











Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

 $\parallel \parallel$

first met my parents just before Christmas, 1990, a few days before I turned thirty.

My father (Ithe father who raised mei (Nas suffering and stewing at the thought of this Oreunion (O (as it Os supposed to be called). He would phone me in Barcelona and say, Olmagine what Mami would have thought (O or Ownere do / stand? (O I tried to re-assure him. Sometimes he now referred to himself as an Oadoptive father. (O I was tired of pleasing him. My whole youth had been about keeping him and my mother happy and being a good girl (Nas in speaking with a German accent, not playing rough with the guys, and only listening to old music.

Frank met me at the airport and a few days later the three of us were ÒreunitedÓ (as they say) in a hotel lobby where we looked at each other and drank strawberry daiquiris.

Frank, my new philosophy professor father, was loud, talkative, emotional, and profoundly introverted. He smoked several packs a day, and from the Ô60s on was a regular pot smoker. He spoke in long, convoluted Henry-Jamesian sentences that fascinated me. He and I, it turned out, admired the same books, like *The Golden Notebook*, *The World as I Found It*, and *The Flight From the Enchanter*. He relished long conversations, especially if he was stoned, but he could be gruff and impatient, too, and sometimes he would terminate our talks abruptly with a regal, Öl am now going to bring this conversation to an end. Ó At different points in his life heÖd tried therapy, but it never worked out for him. HeÖd discarded one therapist after only a few sessions because the therapist could not pronounce ÖDostoevsky. Ó He was fifty-four, diabetic, and could spend all day watching sports or PBS. HeÖd been married twice but abandoned both his wives after less than a year of marriage. One of these marriages produced a daughter, SamanthaÑafter all these years, I had a sister, finally! I felt happy around Frank. He was easy to be with, up to a point: after brief bursts of garrulity and connectedness to others, he sank back into himself and his private world of TV and books.

Marcia, my modern, new USA morn, was fifty but looked older. Whenever I see pictures of Janet Leigh in old age, I think IÖm looking at Marcia the way she looked at fifty. She was alarmingly skinny and gaunt and, like Frank, addicted to nicotine. She had very blue eyes, as I do; she had my face; she remained a stranger. She was polite and even friendly during the reunion, but the neat, insightful, wise lady of the letters did not exactly materialize in real life. The meeting was hard for her. There is a reason why they say one should let sleeping dogs lie, and that reason was expressed all over her face and body language. She conformed in an uncanny way to the image IÖd had of her all those years (the few times IÖd imagined her): standoffish, aloof, very American, very earthy.

During this visit my birth mother said to me, Öl would not have looked for you. Ó During this visit she also said, Öl could tell from the wording of your letters, and your pictures, that you were gay. Ó More than once she would say something like, ÖYou know, I just fail to see any resemblance between us. Ó She tried, as much as possible, to dwell on her two adopted Hawaiian children and how terrific, beautiful, and accomplished they were. One was a girl just sixteen years old, and the other was a boy, in his early twenties. He was a surfer. He was the wholesome, macho person I was supposed to become; he was (I realize this is a controversial thing to say nowadays) the heterosexual person I was supposed to be become.

My birth mother also told us that, before leaving Hawaii for this visit, sheOd burned all the letters weOd exchanged. This action, at the time, seemed logical and admirable: arenOt letters artificial? WasnOt our goal, after all, a physical, healthy real-time interaction that canceled out the correspondence?

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 4 of 6 >>

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylarz

Narrativized

Christopher Linforth

December Notes

Michael Nans

Poetry

Fiction

I met MarciaÕs adopted children, Sam and Sharon; they were quiet and cautious around me, and though nothing very exciting happened between us, one incident indirectly connected to Sam stands out as the most bizarre moment of the week. We were celebrating Christmas near the beach in San Diego, where Sam lived. While Marcia was upstairs making the turkey, Sam and I were standing in the courtyard of his little apartment complex and I was trying out his skateboard. I thought it might be a way to connect with him and, besides, I like skateboards. The boardOs wheels were making a racket as I skated around the courtyard when suddenly Marcia, in her apron, appeared at the railing of the second floor and in a stern but somehow sweet mother voice said, OI donÕt think skateboarding is allowed here!Ó With my feet still firmly balancing my body on the board, I looked up at her and froze. I felt humiliated and young. Above all, I felt that for this one moment she and I had succeeded in ÒregressingÓ and recreating a piece of the childhood years we never experienced together. Having now read some of the adoption literature, I realize that this kind of regressing is quite common during reunions.

Marcia had one odd and endearing habit that in all my life I have noticed in her alone. During that reunion, whenever I spoke, I noticed that she was smiling and mouthing my words as I spoke them. I watched her lips, tongue, and teeth and, yes, she was mouthing, in a gentle, even loving manner, the same words I was using, as if to help me along in my effort to get something out. It was as if she were assuming, during this week, the mother/creator role that held everything and everyone around her together. She performed this gentle service also for Sam and Sharon, when they spoke. I loved this habit of hers and, awkward as it was, I thought it boded well for our future. We did have a brief futureÑa few yearsÑbut, after that first week, I never again observed her to mouth anyoneÕs words. Maybe this, too, was just a phase in our regressing.

<< 123**4**56>>

🔼 SHARE 🚜 😭 🚮 ...)

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117









Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

On the other hand, one day it happened that Frank, Marcia and I were sitting in FrankÖs car and Frank was driving, Marcia in the front passenger seat with me behind herfuyes, like a family! My new family! ÖttÖs funny,Ó I said, Öhow the three of us are sitting here.Ó ÖYou mean,Ó said Marcia, Öbecause the male is driving, the way a male usually does? or what?Ó She didnÖt get it and neither did he. Now itÖs been twenty-three years since that reunion and I canÖt remember whether I explained my thought or not (it was a simple thought: We are riding here like a family!). I didnÖt want to impose on them my intense, private fantasy of erasing years of separation and starting over. At that moment I would have loved to erase Henry and Vera, but I donÖt think Marcia was keen on the idea of erasing Sam and Sharon.

The letters had suggested, at times, a kind heart and an exciting future of dialogue and reconciliation, and she had her good moments during the reunion, but what she thought and couldn'Ot say was this: OWe are having our one and only get-together. We talk and then we part. You have what you need from me; much more I cannot do. O At best, she could maybe accommodate me as a long-distance relative, to be seen and genuinely appreciated once every year or two. She often referred to me as OSpanish, O just because I lived in Spain. She was the only person ever to refer to me as Spanish. In Spain, the most common question I would get during the ten years I lived there was, OWhy did you come here and when are you leaving?O

And I did leave Barcelona, eventually, and chose to settle in southern California. Before my move back to the U.S., though Nand, in fact, only a few months after the reunion NI received this letter from Frank:

There is something I must tell youNa very important matter indeedNthat may make things more difficult rather than less in the short run, though I have hopes that in the long run it will turn out to be better all around. It concerns my relationship with Marcia, your birth mother. It turns out that my relationship with her has developed into something considerably more than Platonic. I am aware, of course, of your initial skeptical prognostication on this score, perhaps too confidently (in the light of ensuing developments) expressed to me over dessert during the first evening of your visit in Fullerton. I am also aware that your skepticism was reinforced by remarks Marcia made to you in the first couple of days of your meetings with her. Of course at that time it seemed equally Ooff-the-wallO to Marcia that anything of a serious, more than Platonic, nature might develop between her and me. But it has. We have not only been talking a lot on the phone, but seeing each other a great deal, a logistical feat in itself, given that she continues to live in Hawaii.

My birth parents got married on a Hawaiian beach. A few of her friends and her adopted children, Sam and Sharon, were present. I wasnŌt invited. They had, apparently, fallen in love again. When I used to tell people about this marriage, the story would elicit smiles, kind words and glowing faces. Perhaps Frank and Marcia thought they were in love and compatible.

She left Hawaii forever and moved into FrankÖs old 1920s bungalow-style house in Orange County. I stayed with them there once, and late one night, I could hear movement in their bedroom. I could hear the creaking and squeaking of their bed and the headboard bumping against the wall and I wondered whether they had any inkling I was awake and nearby. At the time, I figured they were trying in an odd way to be very modern about everything. But they werenÖt modern. They were 1950s people, products of their time.

I chose Los Angeles because it was near them; I wanted to get to know them better and I wanted distance from my adoptive father, who was not mellowing with age. The topic of my birth parents was taboo in his house; he refused to meet them or to acknowledge their existence.

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 5 of 6 >>

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylarz

Narrativized

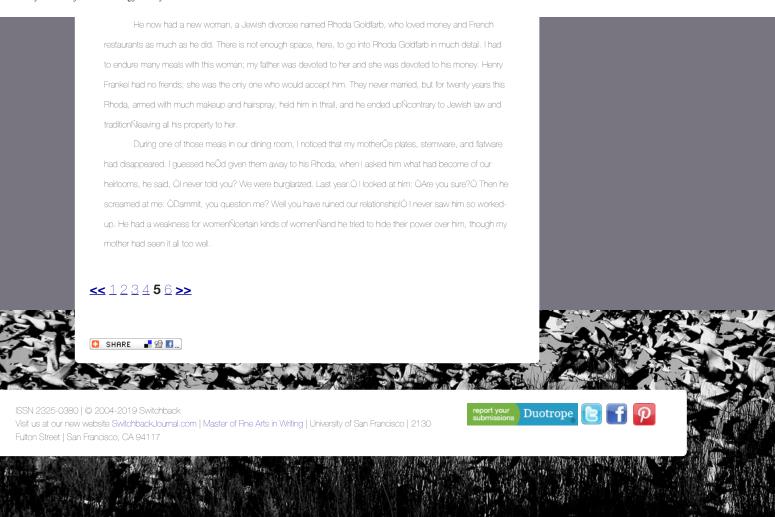
Christopher Linforth

December Notes

Michael Nage

Poetry

Fiction





Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

As I began a new life back in my own country, my foreign ÖexieÖ over, I slowly learned to grasp MarciaÖs next and last incarnation: what had, at first, been the cool, smart lady of the letters, to become the ambivalent sometime mother at the reunion, had now (since I was living too close to her) metamorphosed into an unapproachable, even hostile presenceÑor I should say absence. She closed herself off almost entirely and let Frank do the work of organizing an occasional meeting. Maybe now I no longer believed that we could make up for the thirty years we didnÖt have, but at least I thought we could become a sort of family. Years passed, and she never once reached out to me. Sometimes, when I scheduled a visit, she chose not to be home.

Besides her adopted children, she was devoted to her garden, her cats, and her mystery novels. Marcia turned FrankÖs desolate retreat into a real home, and her garden was her masterpiece. Under her care, the front and back yards became colorful, lush, and jungly cases that all the neighbors admired. She spent hours every day working on this paradise of roses, surrounded by her cats. At night, cats on her lap or at her feet, she read her mysteries and listened to rock and roll, and smoked. She did not stay in touch with anyone in Hawaii and had made only two friends, the gay couple next door, whom she saw more than Frank, for she and Frank had run into difficulties almost from the beginning, and, by the end of the Ö9Os, lived more as polite housemates than as a married couple. She had her own room, but for years slept in an RV parked beside the house.

Once, on one of my visits to their place, I saw her reading from a storybook to two small children on the sofa. I don'Ot remember who those children were verificatives of her neighbors? relatives of Frank? I passed through the living room on my way to the garden and I paused a moment to watch her read. The children, sitting there obediently, seemed alert and engaged as she read. Her voice was proper and matronly, expressive and singsongy. I wanted to sit with them; I wanted her to read to me, too: D'Be my mom!O I wanted to say but didn'Ot, and dutifully continued on my way out the room.

IOm looking forward to our meeting, though I surely donOt know what good it will do youNher words sometimes came back to me. How healing had our reunion been? I now knew who I was; and if it hadnOt been for Marcia and Frank I might never have left Barcelona, where IOd begun to stagnate, and come back home. Did I have a better life? Was I happier? I started working with a new therapist and taking two different antidepressants. I went to twelve-step groups for sexual compulsives and for a while I was abstinent and gave good speeches that were well received. IOd had hundreds of partners and I rarely found out their names. ORomanceO was nasty, brutish and short: moments of open mouths, hot shoving, release, and (sometimes) thanks. After I read The Primal Scream, I asked my father in San Francisco if I had been held much as an infant. He said, OMami did not believe in touching too much. If you cried, she used to say OLet him cry; eventually heOII get tired of crying and go to sleep.O She did not believe in spoiling you.O

I was rarely invited to my birth parents\(\tilde{0}\) house. Even when we hadn\(\tilde{0}\)t seen each other in a while,

Marcia\(\tilde{0}\)s attitude when I appeared in Orange County was a mixture of apathy and annoyance. Sometimes she
yelled at me. When I asked her if she would consider giving up cigarettes, she let loose a vicious torrent of rage I will
never forget. Eventually we stopped talking altogether, and I only saw Frank outside the house. I was proud of
myself for leaving her in peace and for not appearing needy by trying to reach out. Nor did she ever try to reach out
to me. She continued to create a really healthy and heavenly garden.

What brought more joy to her than her garden or even her cats was the birth of a granddaughter. I heard

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 6 of 6

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frankel

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylarz

Narrativized

Ohristopher Linforth

December Notes

Michael Nage

Poetry

Fiction

from Frank that she began to spend half her life in San Diego with her daughter Ös daughter, whom she doted on. I wonder if this child was scared of Marcia, who in her last years looked even more wasted and severe than she had at the reunion.

I wonder if, when the little girl began to speak, Marcia mouthed her words.

Perhaps our silence was dignified and authentic. Perhaps what is called in the adoption literature Othe primal woundO cannot be healed through even the most positive and cheerful later contact. MarciaOs discomfort around her long-lost love child seemed an appropriate way to honor the horror of the initial separation. FrankÖs big extended family in Illinois, on the other hand, welcomed me from the beginning as a member of Òthe clan. Ó I am still in touch with my outgoing Obirth cousins. Ó They tell me news of the family and try to include me. Perhaps my inability to fully appreciate them is due to the way lÕve been programmed: rejection is sexy. A cold birth mother teaches, like no other, about the beauty of rejection.

My birth mother died of lung cancer in February, 2007. She was 66. She had been sick for a long time, but Frank didnŌt disclose the gravity of her illness until nearly the end. During her last days, while she was on life support in intensive care, I wrote to a friend about what I was going through; my friend, Karina, replied right away:

Alex, I know this sounds crazy but I am going to ask you to do one of the most difficult things that you have ever done. It doesn't have to come from the bottom of your heart JUST DO IT NOW while you have a chance. I want you to go to her bedside and tell her that you forgive her and that you love her. You need to release YOURSELF and HER. Say good-bye to her and let her go. You need to go on, get free of that past so that you can go on in PEACE. Spend those last few moments with her, maybe you can be bigger than her and that will give you strength to do something with your life that she didn't. I hope this reaches you in time.

It did. I didnÕt feel at ease with this notion of Òforgiving:Ó this assumed she wanted forgiveness and I couldnÕt make this assumption. But I went to my birth mother one last time. In a room overlooking a freeway, I cried as I held her hand; she couldn'Ot speak anymore, with many tubes and wires coming in and out of her. She cried a little, too, as she looked at me. I said, OI now know you did the best thing in 1960Nthank you! I had the best mother and father and the best life! I was so lucky!Ó I stayed with her and held her hand for an hour. She died the next day.

Of my four parents, Frank is the only one left. Years of junk food, drugs, cigarettes, and inactivity have caught up with him and he is both diabetic and Ocognitively impaired. Ó His daughterÑmy biological half-sisterÑ helped him to sell his house and move in with her up in northern California. She is now looking after him and will inherit his whole estate. Deaf and half-deceased, he wanders through his last years amid a collection of friendly cats and dogs.

Henry Frankel died only a few months after my birth mother. My father, now almost ninety, still thought he was fifty and I was ten. His bad temper and energy for shouting rarely let up, though his gold digger woman kept him half-sequestered in the palatial residence he helped her pay for.

In his last few days, he lay in a room in St. MaryÕs Hospital, face-to-face with a huge crucifix on the wall. He wasnŌt sick; he was just old and dying. I held his hand and told him of my words to Marcia before she died. He appeared annoyed when I first mentioned her unwelcome name, but when I told him exactly what IÖd saidN about having had the best father and mother, and being the luckiest son Nhis head fell back, his face contorted with emotion, and he quietly cried. A few days later he was gone.

<< 12345**6**

🖸 SHARE 📑 😭 🛐 ...

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

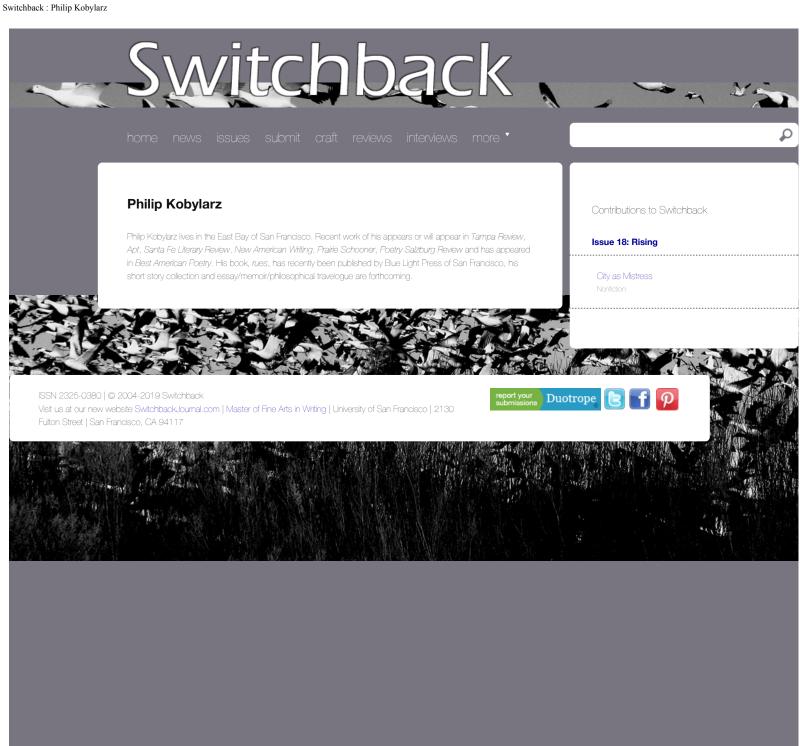
Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130











Switchback

home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylarz

MistraL

The mistral is a wind. Technically speaking, it is born by the presence of a depression in the Gulf of Genoa. Cold air from the peaks of the Alps funnels into the RhTMne valley, picking up speed near Valence; this mass of air becomes an entity of pure energy and blows whatever is in its way away. Its duration lasts from one to three to six, even up to nine days.

It comes in bursts, ebbs and flows of dry air. Sometimes, it arrives as a constant force, knocking over trees, uplifting roofs, downing antennas, dispersing clothes from the laundry line, and causing the usual havoc it is known for

Cats commit suicide when the mistral arrives. Beach-goers morn the loss of their new, expensive kites. It clears the skies and brightens them, and tempts the unknowing to leave the safety of their homes. It keeps hat makers and milliners in business. It knocks on doors and windows throughout the night.

Basically, it pisses everyone off.

It has been known to reverse the direction of those on mopeds. It has raised boats from their moorings. It has tumbled fences of stone. It deposits leaves and refuse on well-kept terraces. It efficiently dries laundered bed sheets hanging outdoors, minutes before it rips them to shreds. It de-fruits trees. It disperses seeds into the sea that will eventually become buddings in foreign countries.

It inhabits your clothes, when walking in it, and tries to remove them, by force, or by its deposits of sand and sycamore seeds. It creates new hair styles. It increases gas mileage if you happen to be driving in its direction. If riding a bicycle, it blows directly into your face no matter what way you turn to avoid it.

It is the topic of small talk when it's in town.

The mistral howls and screams in celebration of itself. One suspects that fish swim deeper the days it is around. It prunes unsightly shrubbery. If it also happens to be raining, it is better to hold up in a telephone booth, for days, until it has calmed. It tinges the air with a bitter pill of coldness, as sharp as an icide.

In its ability to dismiss fog, mist, pollution, it brings the surrounding mountains closer, and gives to them the appearance that they are moving seaward. It tears clouds into wispy shreds, knots the threads, and then burns them with matches of sunlight, spears of reflection off the water.

It bankrupts outdoor markets and stalls racing horses.

The mistral is a reminder that we are merely the pawns of nature; the forces that engendered us, and human folly in general, are so much larger than can even be calculated, that it's best not to even try. Stay inside, lock the windows, close the doors, and wait it out over the pleasant weather of steam rising off a hot cup of tea.

Notre damE

The cathedral bears the gunshot wounds left there by Germans. It is a fortified building, with ramparts and a draw bridge over where there was once a moat. Inside, piped in voices of monks sing. The smell of candles burning. Votive paintings done by locals and treasured as secret works of art. Wooden boats hang in mobiles. The ceiling

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents
Alex M. Frankel

Philip Kobylarz

Narrativized

Christopher Linfor

December Notes
Michael Nagel

Art

Poetry Fiction

http://swback.com/issues/018/city-mistress.html[7/13/20, 1:30:30 AM]

adomed in a Byzantine mosaic of angels and requisite Christian glory. In an adjoining alcove, long white candles can be bought, or stolen. But the interior of this majestic work of architecture is a frail man-made rival to the real beauty this focus point of the city dwells on.

The view from the church's hilltop position is three hundred and sixty degrees. From its terrace, the mountains that hem in the populace look like solidified waves not going anywhere. The Mediterranean stretches out into a blue of distance, towards the orientNand cargo and ferry ships languorously cruise its sheet metal waters.

What the cathedral's function is, and its placement serves, is obvious. What so many American cities lack is such a center pointi\(\tilde{\mathbb{N}}\) a location from which everything can be seen. The golden virgin poised atop the dome can, in turn, be seen from anywhere below. It is a point of observation, where perspective can be achieved. And it, unlike a Sears Tower, or World Trade Center, or Sky Needle, or HOLLYWOOD sign, is not overwhelming in its signification. It merely is what it is. A centering of the immediate cosmos.

Here, fidelity to religion is nothing other than lax. In a country almost completely Catholic, only around fourteen percent of the population attends church. This is not the point. Catholicism is on a continual back burner of the mind; its traditions are not forgotten, rather melded into a way of life, and existing as such (in non-existence), so a balance is met. The famous craft of *Santons*, figurines based on a local rendition of the biblical myth, is one example.

These clay painted figurines sport the local dress and occupations of the region. A man carrying a bundle of sticks, a woman with a slaughtered rabbit, and the *Ravi*, the vilage idiot enraptured at the birth of that famous baby. It is what differentiates France from the commercialization of religion (especially Christmas) in the U.S. Everything is done with style, a twist and blend of location and semi-logical mutation of thought.

Once, meeting with an American who has made this corner of the landscape his home for the last fifteen years, he complained of the lack of spirituality of the city. Did he know St. Victor's church contains underground crypts and dates from the fifth century? That Fort St. Jean was a Templar establishment, now containing remnants of a chapel. That there is a street celebration of the black madonna. Perhaps the community-oriented brand of religious theatricality no longer exists, but the deep, Jungian, mythical connections to religious ceremony are still vibrant, pulsating as regularly as quartz stone.

What acts as a distraction to the option of the monastic way of life is as plain as day: topless beaches, sensuous rock and sand playgrounds, U.S.-modeled fast food restaurants, the mentality of one person to a car, the filmic drivel from southern California that surmounts the kiosks (more so movie billboards in the south), the fascination of the American invention of an invented way of life.

In the p%-disserie, the shelves are stocked with more kinds of edible works of art than a clairvoyant could dream of: pains au chocolat, sabi \check{Z} s, millefeuilles, religieuses, paris-brests, jalousies, forêts-noires. What they're pushing now is a round plop of dough with sugar on top, a hole in the middle. When asked what this too familiar thing was, the baker said, shrugging, it was a gournet American recipel \check{V} le donut.

ImpressionS

I hings you don't see much in America profoundly strike your attention here. The occurrence and recurrence of circuses. If not broadcast on television, then live, in fair grounds, under a real big top. At least once a month. It is always the same menu: high wire acts, women riding elephants, strong men, expert jugglers, flame/sword swallowers, maniacally acrobatic men, more clowns than are ever necessary, very skimpy costumes.

Soundtracked American and British background music, sometimes with added verses in French.

Random productions of Guignoll\(\tilde{\text{Uhis}}\) bright red and yellow mug on nearly every corner. Endless variations on this one particular puppet theme. Pagan religious ceremonies diluted into the kitsch of the contemporary.

Homunculus with stick, whose consummate act is to hit others.

Parades and public masques, with music and Halloween-like costumes. Sugarcoated apples. Traveling carnivals, the rides named in English: Dragonfly, Whirl, Twist, NASA Rocket, and Speedway of Thrills. A difference in the carny culture, the people here are relatively well-dressed, lack tattoos, and are friendly and don't harass passers by into wasting their money. They are quite willing to give away their plastic, or stuffed, junk as prizes.

Telephone booths lack vandalism and graffiti. Pigeons stay up in the rooflops. Seaguls on the beach don't beg for food. Less trash on hiking trails. Restaurants empty on weeknights. Streetlights don't blink on and off, flooding the quiet empty rues at night in pools of yellow.

La mer est d'un bleu presque violet, au listel de l'horizon ĐAndrŽ Suarès "Paysage Antique" de ldŽes et Visions

MediterraneaN

The Mediterranean is a liquid crystal desert. It represents, on good days, infinity at its calmest. Unlike the beaches of, say southern California, the intersection of sea and land here is not a huge sandy border, a margin that says: the beach. Instead, it invades the land, in bays, it laps at the earth at the delta of the Camargue, it beats a certain rhythm on the rocks above which the city resides.

On windy days, it raises a surf, one- to five-foot swells hardly grand enough for the desperate surfers to make any use of, but still they try. Currently, wind surfing is the ragef\(\text{N}\) brightly colored sails, like flags of yet-established countries crisscross the water's surface in a sea parade. Sailboats are numerous, usually small versions of the larger, older types. Rarely are the mostly uninhabited islands visited; from a distance they look desolate and inviting.

Under the water, aquatic life teems. Sea slugs, schools of fish, anemones, starfish, eels, crabs, and urchins move about completely undisturbed in the cooler months of the year. In the spring and summer, these creatures bear with the disturbances and fondlings of curious humans, and wait out infrequent storms with the patience of sirens.

Around Marseille, the hills seem to gradually rise from the basin of water, then quickly and steeply staircase. They form formidable cliffs and outcroppings in the surrounding wild areas, the *calanques*, south of the city, and serve as remote, weather-eroded, in places lush, in others, barren, refuges from city life and virtual stockples of solitude.

There are underwater caves with famous pre-historic paintings, one featuring "penguins" and hand prints. There are white stepping stone rock hills that sink into the below. There are grassy plains and plateaus that diminish abruptly in the snow of returning waves. There are rock and sand beaches that soon will be full of beautiful, tan, more than half-nude sun worshippers, but are quite empty and spacious in the off-season months. An endless amount of wandering awaits those willing.

Less than an ocean and more than a great lake, the Mediterranean is just what it is. In moonlight, it offers an enchanting mirror that dares you to attain its surface. It smells of salt and iodine, is clear when viewed from close, deeply (unrealistically) blue from afar on a sunny day. It has the ability to flux from every color within the gray, blue, green, and white spectrum. It strums its instrument constantly, putting those susceptible to sleep and looks good enough to drink.

It offers up shells, seaweed, polished stones with Zen inscriptions carved into them, driftwood, and minutely sculptured peach seeds. It replenishes the mind in its being a body of water that, perhaps, shouldn't be there. Something about it, a vastness, a lucidity, that evades even the finest-tuned of senses and requires one, upon leaving it, to almost immediately want to return.

CommercE

I here is more stuff than anyone could ever, would ever want to buy. All things under the sun, anything that is "fashionable," arrive here and are replicated, cheaply, without threat of dearth. From every type imaginable of sunglasses, to clothes, to shoes, computers, cars, motorcycles, trinkets, books (who is translating American & British fiction so quickly?), toys, bicycles, basically your whatever-you-want.

In the downtown, in small stores, fabrics from the east can be bought cheaply, from Turkish rugs to African tablecloths. Secondhand traders stock the most current titles of American, Brit, East African, Algerian, and

Japanese popular music (including U.S. independent labels). Junk markets are held once a week and sell everything from wallets, to plants, to spices, to fresh fish, to herbs, really the recipe for the alchemist bent on living well. Shopping, in the general, browsing sense can take up to two weeks of constant investigation into the numerous stores, and small-time vendors, department stores, sadly modern super malls, and merchandise districts. It is a consumer's dreamland that represents what the West is all about: treasures from lands near and abroad, so much useful and non-useful items that this business of capitalism generates in partnerships of crime. There's no hint that this money-based system is an idea that has run its course: after purchasing anything one can desire, it becomes almost a monotonous theatre of mimelNexchanging shiny silver & gold coins (representing nothing) for the unneeded item of desire (formed, colored, shaped, nothing). And if the particular vendor doesn't have exactly what you seek, he or she will know someone who does. An endless, vivid circle that represents only the idea of wholeness, large and empty in its center. Making life the same anywhere you go.

Vers toulousE

It is a city that is much nearer to the West. It is a maze unto itself, full of stores and shops selling the latest clothes, music, sunglasses, gadgets. Strange how many of these newest of new items look as if they were designed in the late 1970s. But that is mere trend, as trends are excuses for what is unneeded, with the requisite undercurrent of statement.

Toulouse is surprisingly large, the country's fourth city, with a m2ange of inhabitants, although this is hard to discover when in the centre ville. The people look oddly pale for being denizens of a southern French city; the women seem to have larger bodies, the men look more "northern," but these might be tricks of perception.

Perhaps the race of Cathars, who are said to have invented the kiss as a greeting (as an exchange of breath), had truly been obliterated from the genetic pool, and the populace is now represented by the conquering Albigensians.

The fentasy of speculation

Though large, the city lacks a self-portrait. Situated on a plain in between mountain ranges, it doesn't have much of a characteristic topography, other than a bisecting, slow-moving river. It is a mass of old, beautiful architecture Ncathedrals, chapels, villas, monuments that rise unexpectedly out of the mishmash of well-cared-for ancient lodgings, and of course, the eyesores of modernity.

The eeriness that it evokes is most felt when one is within its interior. There is no view. There is no off-in-the-distance. There is nothing to gauge a pedestrian's smallness, or relationship to the larger world, other than the reflections of its grand architecture in the most immediate shop window.

Perhaps this larger view is unnecessary. There are many bookstores that have extensive libraries about the Languedoc-Roussillon area, hundreds of tomes on the city's architecture, history, and lore (it seems the extinct Cathars are a goldmine in this respect), books in English, German, Spanish, and Italian, a slew of World Art stores, and more restaurants than a human could possibly eat in, given the brevity of life. Toulousians need not venture outside their city's boundaries to get a taste, feeling, sensation of the riches of earthly life.

Les ponts de toulousE

The smaller, less used, older ones are the most beautiful. Pont Neuf is the most famous. They connect the two halves of the city like vertebrae. What lies beneath them is more interesting, for the bridges provide the architecture of an underworld.

Along the quays of Toulouse people satiate their desire for the sea, an open space. Students, a large amount of the populace (at least a quarter and a *quartier*), lounge in the sun, read, juggle and reenact other medieval pastimes. They smoke, drink, talk of love, life, and sex, read newspapers, and creatively exist.

It is along the river where one can find Moroccans eager to sell their contraband of hashish sticks. They call out to passersby, "cigarette," simply to purchase attention. When responded to, they let you know that they have hashish, powerful stuff, too, homemade. Though you have passed a street musician sporting a Visa-Mastercard

sign, the spicemen take only hard currency.

They'll ask where you're from and tell you about their lives back home, across the sea. They won't cut you the best of deals, but they'll share a few moments asking about the greener pastures from where you come. They'll give you a cheeky, stained-teeth smile, shake your hand and tell you to come back when you have enough pocket money you don't care about. Salut, mes amis.

Aside: Coastal memorieS

And so it is almost a desert. With a cold wind, freezing even pools of sand in the hills. Puddles of salt turning into balls of crystals, rock near ocean. Pebbles washed upf\(^\text{lfinely-crafted layers}\), a beach of worrying beads. Like a hand-rolled cigarette, only it tasting better, not the metallic rasp in the throat. Hair and veils receding. Needing to wash

Washing.

It blows and it blows and it blows. It blows through you. It penetrates bone. It is as bitter as smoke. It dries the laundry quick. It burns holes of salt into your clothes. As the woman in the world of her, your life, that one desired, just look Nevery movie Nithe one that gets away. One you cannot have.

Around her, and her city, there are hills painted Turkish, that is blue and light green, always black, always white. Outlines of jagged obelisk-tipped topography, a calcite horizon layered in brushstroke green, mint needles of dry pine.

Wind from the north, worse than light.

Crusades, spoils of victorY

Because the hostilities in the former Soviet block countries serve as a modern little crusade and wet the European, or Western (two terms yet to be defined), appetite for a theater of war spectacle, habits die hard. We bomb Babylonia sucking the fruits of its gardens, the taming of the Bower, our bad habits never stop dying.

Being greatly disliked on the basis of foreign-ness, a chin or a nose cast in a certain way, helps to hurry exodus. A wonderful historical period, mind you, but the time's right up to it, one long wait in the anteroom of the mechanic. Chicks in swimsuits on the wall calendars.

The beach remains undivided, for the most, adult parts. The etymology of adultery made apparent. A mathematical equation for the numerical relation to the amount of articles of clothing not there. Yet, there.

Mediterranean full of beautiful, easily the world's most beautiful, women, and men, bathing, together. The men selling boards of junk, some indeed needed, multi-wonderful colors, sunglasses, bracelets, friendship bands, these flags. Then the same men out of their skull yellow red black caps in the lousy bars filled with older, tiring men, smoke and the smell of old dreams predictably quixotic, in half-reality, it all going out with its 2 a.m. lights, dingy and fluorescent. They go home yelling, singing, pissing where the dogs earlier did, kicking the trash in the sewers like bills of their own spilt paychecks.

LeagueS

Looking up from a depth of ten feet below the sea, the waves breaking into surf on rock present another weather. The surface of the water resembles clouds erupting with rain or snow, the cliffs covered in sea vegetation, with creatures such as urchins and mussels, look like the sides of not-so-arid steppe, and fish, swimming singly or in bands of many, seem to be spacecraft going through docking maneuvers. Otherworldly is the feeling, yet its deterioration into clichŽ gives a clue to a truer nature.

This is the first world, a primeval one that is immediately recognized. The quietude underwater is eerie. The lack of horizon and surrounding blueness obliterates a sense of perspective: all that can be sensed is within feet from the viewer. It leads one to think fish have a concept of the future, or even distance in a greater meaning than

what is continuously arriving within the range of sight. There is no meaning in this realm, other than the bizarre phenomenon we label life. The maritime world is clearly existential.

Breaking the threshold of surface, where distance reigns, are arid islands, white, barren, torturous in contour, ironical reminders of the inherent contrast and the paradox of being. Thorns of desert relentlessly weathering amidst plains of life bearing water.

Easy access clarity. On the crowded summer beaches, approximately five- to ten-percent of sun bathers even enter the sea. The secrets of the underworld can be revealed for the minimum price of a pair of goggles or a diving mask. It seems the topographies of almost-nude human bodies hold more interest than the kingdom of Poseidon, constantly churning in life, just below a blue extending horizon.

Matters of a more earthly devicE

There is, as we all know, the French kiss. Especially famous among grade- and high-schoolers, it is an initiation into the seductive powers of the culture(?), language(?), passion of the stereotypical Latin populace. More interesting, although not as pleasing, is the French greeting.

We all know what it is, but for those who are in need of briefing, this gesture/movement/ritual is extended to friends and family, never strangers (unfortunately, thus making get-togethers among friends more fun). It might be described as a near hug, with the placement of each cheek next to those of the one being greeted (cheek to cheek), touching or near touching, with the addition of actual kisses (what we call "pecks" in American) to the aforementioned cheeks or, most often, in the air slightly above and in the direction of the cheeks of the one being greeted. In some regions, this process is repeated, making it four kisses in two complex, bird-like, mock-courting ritualistic movements. In other regions, it is done only once, and in some rare cases, an odd thrice.

Let it be said that it is an interesting, intimate, wonderful way of bonding. Especially when the one to be greeted is an attractive member of the opposite sex. A nose full of his or her hair, cologne or perfume, and the proximity to his or her ear and nape enhances any social situation. The problem that arises with those of non-Franco cultures, for instance Anglo-American, is that one is never sure when exactly to extend this type of greeting, since it can be extended to children up to the age of twenty (young men included and depending on the personality) and older women, depending upon geniality.

The greeting has eroded into a somewhat forced practice, thus, and this is only supposition, the kiss-in-air mutation, with theatrically practiced and pronounced kiss sounds and puckering. If we dare delve into the meaning of the practice, so late into the twentieth century, it seems to announce that there are close bonds that link family and friends, beyond superstitions that build walls and carve out personal spaces, without the need for extensive elbow room. Yet today it is becoming a ritual of days gone by, is practiced as heartfelt as children in catechism cross themselves, and is a routine disconnected from its sense of meaning, un-revitalized, the curse of all tradition.





Switchback

home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

Narrativized

Christopher Linforth

When I first started writing essays I wasnŌt really writing essays. I barely knew what the term meant or what the parameters were for what I was attempting to accomplish. I was ten, though. Or perhaps eleven. I remember in history class we were given thick textbooks that had been at the school for generations. Scrawled across the pages were crude drawings of naked women: voluptuous, big-haired, dead-eyedl\(\tilde{\text{Na}}\) kind of \(Playboy\) palimpsest.

The teacher told us to ignore the graffiti and to focus on the words. We were studying the causes of the First World War; how all of those European countries could have converged into a destructive genesis, a beginning of war. The book told a story\(\tilde{\text{Na}}\) albeit in the essay form\(\tilde{\text{Noff}}\) feranz Ferdinand, train timetables, the Schlieffen Plan, jingoism, imperial dreams. History had been rendered into narrative. From where I sat in the classroom these weren\(\tilde{\text{O}}\) t competing theories of causality, but parts of the story\(\tilde{\text{Ni}}\) they added the drama. When it came to me writing an essay on this subject, I retold facts and names and places as though I were Borges\(\tilde{\text{O}}\)s Pierre Menard rewriting \(D\)on Quixote. My thesis was from the book. My supporting evidence was from the book. My conclusion was from the book. The whole thing was handwritten on four loose sheets of lined paper and turned in with my name printed at the top. Class moved onto the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler. By the time we had memorized the events of the Beer Hall Putsch, the teacher had finally graded the papers. Marked in scarlet was an A.

At some point during my undergraduate career I learned that ancient Greek drama was predicated on a three-part structure. Exposition, rising action, and resolution were banded around the classroom as though art could be so easily condensed. The professor talked of the multiple structures and models Naristotle S six elements, Elizabethan five-acts, the Fichtean Curve Nworking to appease our worth, to create a sense of our place in the world. He drilled into us that however you defined the structure it did, in some manner, contain a beginning, middle, and an end. When he mentioned catastrophe I perked up. Depending on your artistic inclinations this type of finale can draw out the virtue in change or make clear that any change is nullified. An uneasy sense of this latter finality reminds me of Hemingway S prizcis that stories hurtle toward death. And, yet, somewhere there has to be a continuation of life. The first time I wrote an essay I was in Kansas and it was morning. I was still reeling from a stroll across the prairie, my boots crunching over switchgrass and my vision full of sprawling fields and the swallow-tailed kite cruising on the thermals. I typed a few thousand words about the land and my relocation to the area and to memories of childhood. Ideas spiraled, ejecting themes and unspoken connections. I became lost in the text, not knowing where to stop or how to shape the piece. Eventually, I deleted the essay and handed in some generic sliver of autobiography, some recollection of my early life.

For years I have been writing fiction, churning out dozens of short stories and three excretable novels, which I am glad to report, remain unpublished. Over time, though, my life has morphed into a three-act story, and now entering my middle years I am increasingly concerned with the last part. Perhaps many fiction writers transpose narrative structure onto life. All of those people, events, coincidences, transformed into meaning/vessential elements

Issue 18 Rising





December Notes

Michael Nagel

Nobody knows what to do with themselves when a twenty-year-old walks into Sandy Hook elementary school with an assault rifle and kills twenty first-graders, six adults, and then himself. But it's almost Christmas and the city is all lit up. We built our tree in the window and opened our blinds. The New York *Times* published the names, the ages, white on black, and my dad shook his head and scratched his scalp and took us all out for a nice Mexican dinner at the mall. All anyone wants to know is why this keeps happening. Michael said this mall will do over a billion in sales this month, the fifth highest in the country. I ordered the sour cream enchiladas, my mom's favorite, and forked a bite onto her plate.

It stormed last night and trash covered the streets, lights fell from the trees. I could feel the wind against the car, affecting us. I asked Janessa how fast the wind was blowing and she said twenty-five miles an hour, which didn't sound that fast. I said, isn't it sometimes a hundred miles an hour? And she said, in a hurricane. The intersections were out and the lights were flashing. I said it felt like we were driving through a place we'd never hear.

I've been listening to Christmas music to remind myself it's Christmastime. A scientist in Connecticut is looking for genetic reasons the shooter might have snapped. He said it would just be nice to know. Yes, I thought, it would just be nice to know. The Huffington Post published the twenty-six portraits online yesterday and I scrolled through them all. I felt, somehow, I owed it to the victims to know what they looked like. I clicked as fast as I could click.

I've been reading Travels in Siberia by lan Frazier, a sprawling yawn of a book, which I mean in the most endearing way. I am in love with it. Yesterday, I discovered a band called Grimes, and their album "Visions." I'd heard it before, but things have to come to you at the right time, a convergence of details.

Mamet said art cannot be created in the conscious mind. We have to live between intentionality and whim: exactly the space I seek to occupy. And yesterday Instagram announced it would sell users' photographs to advertisers without payment or notice, causing everyone to more or less freak the fuck out. A reminder, I thought, that these things were never ours to begin with. In response, users have been posting pictures of their assholes.

The NRA promised to make a meaningful, constructive statement about the massacre, and I've been fighting some kind of cold, shivering in my clothes, all wrapped up in scarves. Pitchfork is posting their end-of-the-year lists: Purity Ring, Cat Power, Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti. It's thirty-four degrees out. I put down Travels in Siberia, but pick it back up again. I set it on my desk. I told Janessa I didn't know what to get her for Christmas, that I'd had a certain idea but it wasn't going to work outiN was lying on the couchNand she kissed me on my lips and said I was the best husband, which wasn't what I'd been expecting.

I can guess the name of every song by the way the singer says certain words. I can tap beats in perfect facsimile on my steering wheel. I am a goddamn fucking miracle sometimes. The small group wondered how anyone could feel safe when anything could happen at any moment. We have to be prepared, they said, and I was listening across the restaurant, nodding, yes, thinking, yes, agreeing, yes, we have to be prepared. They were all, all of them, old men.

The founder of Instagram claims he has no intention of selling users' photographs, there has been a misunderstanding. The Executive Vice President of the NRA said, the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun, and he held the podium with both hands. In Newtown they painted a fence with the

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

Page 1 of 2 >>

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Franke

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylarz

Narrativized

Christopher Linforth

December Note

Poetry

Fiction



December Notes

Michael Nagel

There are things in my cupboard I didn't know where there: agave nectar, iodized salt, poudre ^p%-te magic. Last night, after the show, Dan said, now that's what art is all about, interpretation. The dancer was cradling a long red sheet, rocking herself back and forth. And Janessa leaned into me and said, what's happening right now? And I wasn't exactly sure. The autopsy was inconclusive, the answers had not been inside, had not come spilling out onto the table, and all I want to understand are the things in my own cupboard.

I go for a walk in the cold, my hands in my pockets. The Christmas tree in the park is four stories tall, perfectly tapered, perfectly lit, a Christmas tree made of pure Christmas tree. I buy my wife a coat from Target, and the cashier, the girl, says, next, and I rub my face in my hands and press my tongue against the backs of my teeth. I've been trying to get in the Spirit.

On Christmas Day, my father-in-law buys me a red-checkered hunting cap, and I spend the afternoon buttoning and unbuttoning its flaps. The snow piles up on our windshields and we scrape it off with dustpans from the cupboard. When we get home, icicles are dripping from the faucets. I wonder if the pipes are OK, Janessa says, and I think, the pipes?

I've made a New Year's resolution: I will start taking care of myself, and I will stop trying to be funny.

I remove the fire alarms and turn on the heater. Our apartment fills with smokel\(\tilde{\text{N}}\) dust burning in the vents\(\tilde{\text{N}}\) and we cough into blankets and curl up on the couch. Just before we pass out, I reach over and touch Janessa's kneen

The Sandy Hook shooter's face was on the magazine covers in the checkout aisle, and I stared into his eyes while I held my cottage cheese. He looked young, I thought, and then thought nothing else. I've been wearing my faux-fur, red-checkered hunting cap, clipping it under my chin, looking spectacular.

When the city freezes over, I drink coffee on my couch and stare out my windows. The ice starts in from the edges. A woman walks with her arms inside her jacket so it looks like she has no arms at all. I am sitting under this electric blanket, one of five people conscious in the Central Time Zone. The smell of smoke has braided itself into this couch. The smell of smoke, or the smoke itself? I'm not sure.

Nobody wakes up until Thursday.

The snow accumulates on ledges and banisters, on trashcans. I draw faces with my fingers. On Park Road, on a green utility box, a graffiti artist wrote DO GOOD THINGS. The Spirit of Christmas has come out of the world now: has come out of the world and into my hat where it will live for the next eleven months, vibrating.

Twenty million Russians were lost in World War II. A people fluent in grief, I think to myself.

The parking lot is a perfect sheet of ice and I slide sideways across its surface. I sit in courtyards and listen to the trees harden. At stoplights exhaust lifts into the branches and turns the snow a sick pitch of black. A house burned down on Christmas Day with a grandpa still inside. We ran the shower and burst the pipes. I sat in the park then wearing my red-checkered hat, crossing and uncrossing my legs.

Are we too becoming fluent in grief? I wondered. Time magazine published a black and white photo of twenty-seven crosses and I swallowed all the spit in my mouth.

Did the grandpa suffocate before he felt himself ignite? Did the teacher recognize her son behind the mask? And if I wear this faux-furred, red-checkered hat while my daughter is conceived will her skin glimmer with the sheen of Christmas Pizzazz?

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 2 of 2

Nonfiction

Cycles of Rejection: An Elegy for My Four Parents

Alex M. Frank

City as Mistress

Philip Kobylarz

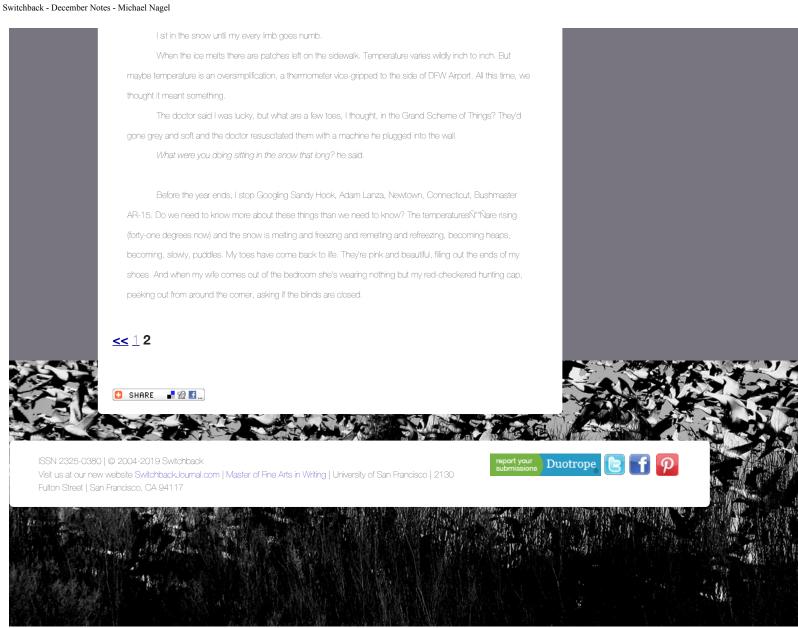
Narrativized

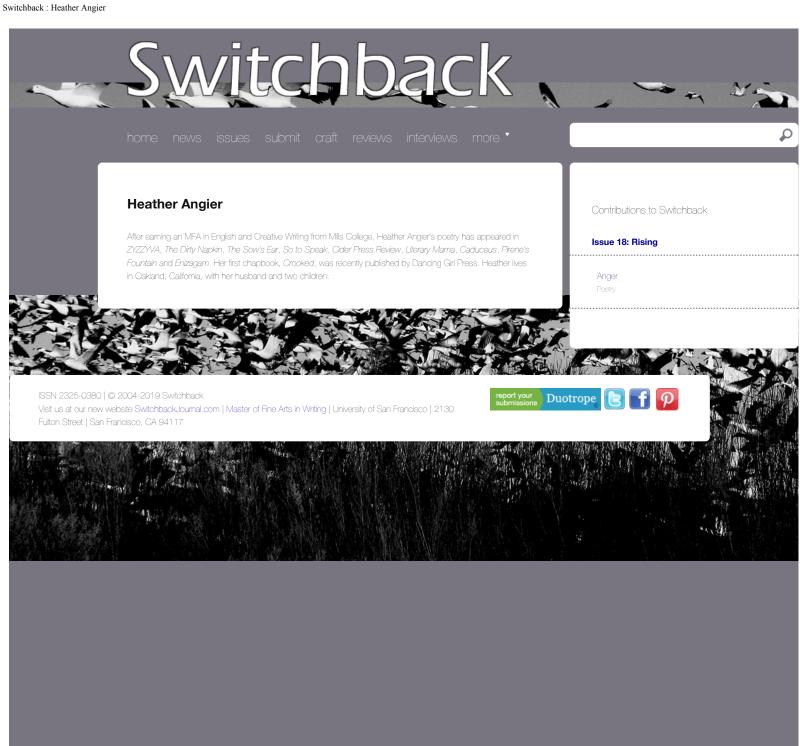
Christopher Linforth

December Note

Poetry

Fiction





Issue 18

Rising Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Topography

The Mermaid Behind the Glass

Manuals for Trains

Signs of a Struggle

Coyote

from Leafmold

MPG of Wild Boar

For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Dillon J. Welch

Fiction

Art

Anger

Heather Angier

Blown in like a cloud of billowing pollenÑ

see how it carries on through the wheezy streets

and spreadsÑthe Autumn cobwebs hung

maniacal yellow. Our bloodshot eyes

and constricted throats are stinging, sore with itÑ

it covers our windshields and house stepsÑ

so fine a dusting children stop and $\text{spit}\tilde{\mathbb{N}}$

scratch their names in it.

🚺 SHARE 🚜 📆 🔣 ...

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130











Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117

Switchback

Maggie Blake



Maggie Blake has a poem, Ol Tried, O in The Southern Poetry Anthology, Volume V: Georgia, published by Texas Review Press (2012), and another, ÒFor Carly,Ó in the 2013 Spring issue of Town Creek Poetry. Her review of Jane HirshfieldÖs Come, Thief for Flycatcher is forthcoming this fall, and her poem ÒAugust IncamateÓ was recently accepted by Tar River Poetry. She has studied at Stanford, Oxford, and Brown University and is currently engaged in a five-summer MFA program at Sewanee, the University of the South. During the year, she teaches high school English at The Westminster Schools in Atlanta, Georgia.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 18: Rising

Topography

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117









witchback

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Anger

The Mermaid Behind the Glass

Manuals for Trains

Signs of a Struggle

Covote

from Leafmold

MPG of Wild Boar

For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Dillon J. Welch

Fiction

Topography

Maggie Blake

At Lake Oconee, I ask about the depth and learn that all the lakes of the southeast more or less are man-made: dammed rivers, ravaged trees standing throat deep in water, left for fisheries, the thriving trees on shore the privacy screens of the wealthy.

As the motor boat skips and slices, I imagine a cemetery, a school yard, submerged placeholders of a necessarily abandoned town, the river turning ceilings into fathoms. The water itself holds too much silt for us to know. I hear you coughing,

that afternoon on the boat, beers in our hands, that night on the dock, eating grilled corn, a bass note, a constant rough and rasped undercurrent. You say, Ol used to only get sick in the winter. Ó And when we wake up late on Sunday morning, I am shaking off

the whiskey as you tell me, shyly, hives have spread to the bottom of your feet. Timidly you raise your shirt, not for sunscreen but for me to smooth cream on the welts that constellate your back, the raised islands of the topographical and secret map of illness.

I donŌt tell you about the steeple I pictured underneath our feet as we swam, scratched initials in a doorjamb sloughing to driftwood, backyard gardens of catfish, somnolent, heavy. I imagine the cough to be a summer cold, too much pollen, a boat wake against new pilings.

🚺 SHARE 📑 😭 🖺 ...)

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117













The Mermaid Behind the Glass

John F. Buckley and Martin Ott

The fall of Atlantis is all our faults. We are glued to flood news, spontaneous gills, my own legs fused, mind swimming behind a screen that pulses and broods.

No one remembers to feed the fish. We let them comingle with scruffy tritons with missing scales, neglecting our pets as we inhale The Tuna Whisperer.

Lost surfers are occasionally caught in nets made of plastic rings and bags, and nothing stops The Sturgeon Surgeon from attempting to save a life or two.

We are sluggish on coral couches, fins rooted in pudgier flesh. Swimming only to the fridge and back for fried krill puffs, we blame our bulk on omega-3 fatty acids.

We all have a sense of drowning now, high-rise apartments brushing the sea bottom, the other world pale and brittle as love. A mermaid's fate is to watch.

🚺 SHARE 🚜 📆 🔣 ...

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Anger

Topography

Manuals for Trains

Signs of a Struggle

Covote

from Leafmold

MPG of Wild Boar

For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Dillon J. Welch

Fiction















Rebecca Morgan Frank is the author of the poetry collection Little Murders Everywhere (Salmon Poetry), a finalist for the 2013 Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Her poems have appeared in such places as Guernica, Ploughshares, The Georgia Review, Post Road, Blackbird, Crazyhorse, and Best New Poets 2008, and have been featured on Poetry Daily and Verse Daily. Her new work-in-progress received the Poetry Society of AmericaÕs 2010 Alice Fay di Castagnola Award. The co-founder and editorin-chief of the online magazine $\underline{\textit{Memorious}}$, she is an assistant professor at the University of Southern MississippiÕs Center for Writers.

Issue 18: Rising

Manuals for Trains



Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Anger

Topography

The Mermaid Behind the Glass

Manuals for Trains

Signs of a Struggle

Covote

from Leafmold

MPG of Wild Boar

For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Dillon J. Welch

Fiction

Manuals for Trains

Rebecca Morgan Frank

I was born with a train in my ear, its pitched blast invading my body like a tuba-parasite.

Each conductor has a signature move.

his consecutive wails warp around my dreams and choke them into new directions.

Leaving town, I canOt sleep, wait for the schedule, long for the surprise

of delay, a new man at the helm making his mark on my landscape without ever

leaving a footprint. Not once seeing my face in sleep even though I conjure

each him, how he feels in the power of speed breaking the black quiet with fierce bursts of air.

I am an echo chamber for passengers headed somewhere else.

They never stop for me, never open their doors, just power

through the crossroads with rumbling emphasis to their songs.



ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback











Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Anger

Topography

The Mermaid Behind the Glass

Manuals for Trains

Coyote

from Leafmold

MPG of Wild Boar

For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Fiction

Signs of a Struggle

Kenneth E. Harrison, Jr.

Thousands of birds

breathe into a day

falling toward you

a child outside alone

whose turn it is

to pull weeds

from the flowerbeds

again & again

thinking of the river

& how your hands

trembled like moonlight

across the water

as they dragged

the young body out $\!\tilde{N}$

🚺 SHARE 🚜 📆 🔣 ...

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117

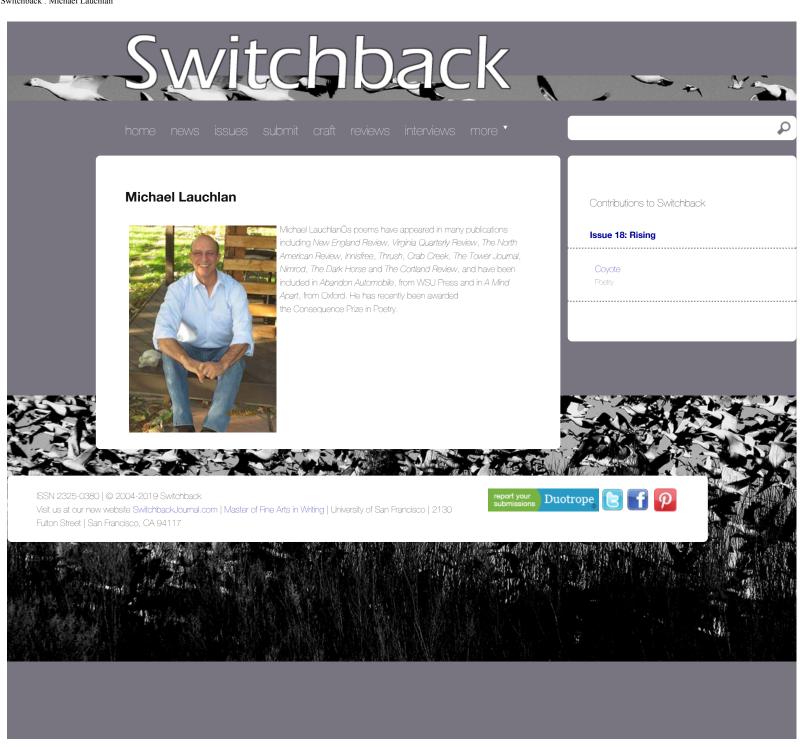














Coyote

Michael Lauchlan

After some surgeries and a few losses, something began to crack, like a cement under a sledge,

though sometimes itÕs like turning a cap onto a pipe in the dark, with water dripping on my feet,

trying to stay square and catch a rusty thread, as if our lives hung by threads as they always

and never have. Now something Os watching me like a phantom suburban coyote, one that lurks

behind warehouses, near railroads, snagging pets or feasting on compost and eyeing the strange ones who come

and go without hearing or sniffing. Unseen beyond pines, sheÕs heard our cars start each day and

endured their foul furnes while waiting for me to once forget where IÕm going, to welcome

the joy of incipient dawn and look back as though into a mirror.

🚺 SHARE 🚜 📆 🔣 ...

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Anger

Topography

The Mermaid Behind the Glass

Manuals for Trains

Signs of a Struggle

from Leafmold

MPG of Wild Boar

For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Dillon J. Welch

Fiction

Art



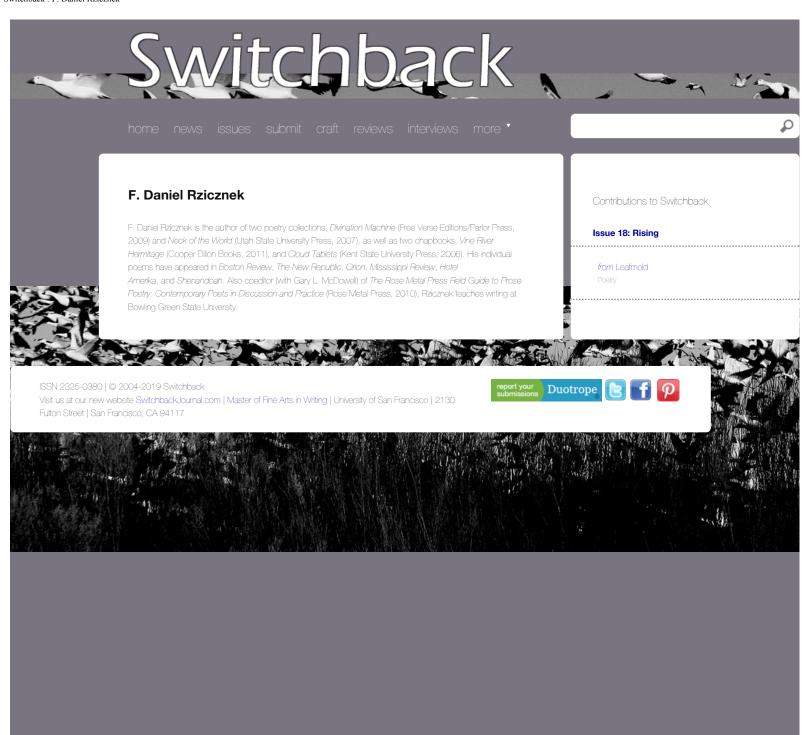












Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Anger

Topography

The Mermaid Behind the Glass

Manuals for Trains

Signs of a Struggle

Covote

from Leafmold

MPG of Wild Boar

For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Fiction

from Leafmold

F. Daniel Rzicznek

Epiphanies only happen when waiting on people to arrive at the bar: the looks you give and are given, the time on the wall, the music sweeping by song after song, and the sudden face of arrival that cuts a wake across the moment, urges it through your fingers and across into a breast pocket. A corner; drank myself into. A false sense of sun. Deep space between the trunks of trees: the whole of your awareness hangs on it. A wedge in the dirt: morning sun the irritating yellow of sweet corn: a groove in the wall where the tempers open. I take my hand and go like this. (He died on the kitchen floor, warm dishwater dripping, growing cool on his hands, the sound of someone mowing grass after dark in the distance.) We take our potions and pray for sleep. Certain figures occur in summer: the shape of water just after a swimmer has stepped from it, phantom of dew where a glass stood. Can the bird-shadow be happier than the bird? I work at making this space denser. Each image rhymes with a music not heard, a series of translations within the same curbed language. A house inside the ghost: grace.

🚺 SHARE 🚜 📆 🔣 ...

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

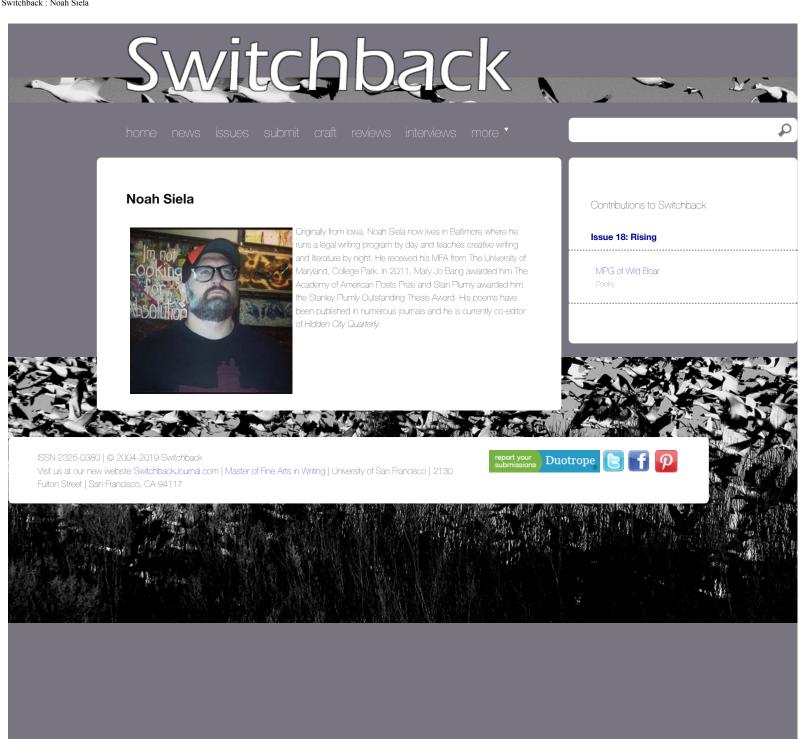
Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117











home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more



Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Anger

Heather Angle

Topography

iviaggie diake

The Mermaid Behind the Glass

John F. Buckley and Martin Ott

Manuals for Trains

Rohanna Marrian Frank

Signs of a Struggle

Kenneth E. Harrison, Jr.

Covote

Michael Lauchlan

from Leafmold

F. Daniel Rzicznek

MPG of Wild Boar

For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Dillon J. Welch

Fiction

Art

MPG of Wild Boar

Noah Siela

Some of the muffins here lack self-esteem, the poppyseed guilt-baked with narcotic false positives.

Wolf, wolf! it yells to its scone neighbor whoÕs busy hiding OccamÕs razor

under reliable blueberryÕs base, butter-dense in its scalloped-pressed wrapper.

Always have razor-hiders for friends, the planetÕs foghorn stuck on blow

and the current state of electrical sleuthing far from adequate enough to dampen its decibels

let alone tucker itself to death with a million attaboy back slaps.

Oh God! DonŌt even get me started with the amount of bad guys out there

dematerializing the fail-safe blueprints by stained-glassing elementary science,

the bad guys walking fast and backward everywhere so they have the advantage

of not knowing what \tilde{O} s going to kill them to impede them from killing

while the rosary-twirling near-dead baby fiddle with the radio nob

to banish the static to see when to emerge from the attic

to attack, their last act of valor. ItÕs a tough world, muffin, full of subtropical forests

with overworked gorillas clubbing their children to death while an unclassified super mosquito

slurps up the clubberÖs type-O, non-scholar, result-thick Ares rides his wild boar

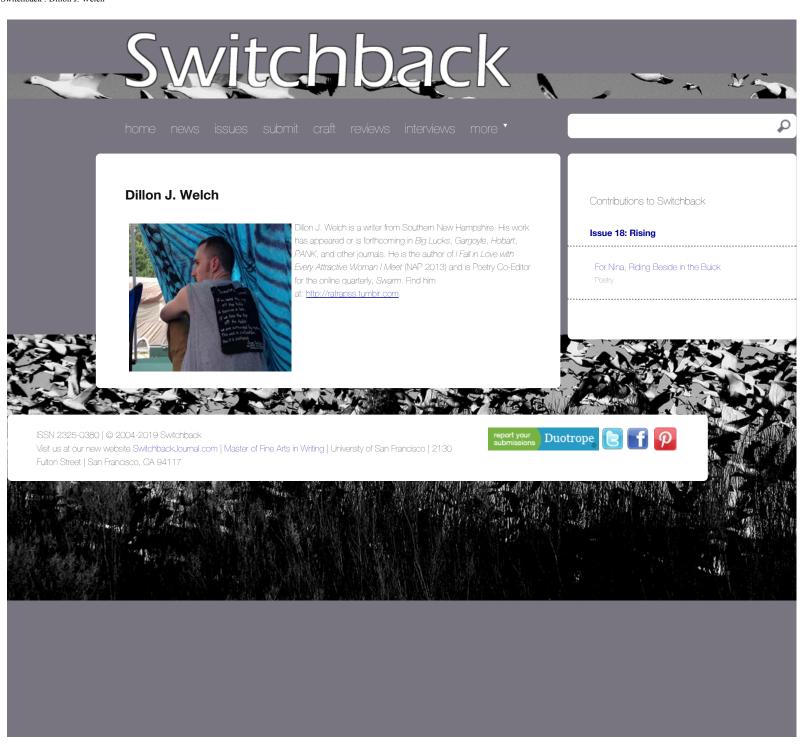
in the HOV lane and nothing we really want to do about it because itÕs a naked guy with a spear

on top of a wild boar and weÕre always hungry and distraction-needy on our commute every morning

after leaving the house angry and sad that we, again, dropped the toast memory-side down.

🖸 SHARE 📑 😭 🖪 ...





For Nina, Riding Beside in the Buick

Dillon J. Welch

There are some nights like most nights I sit outside and feel lousy or quiet and musty like an old oven mitt. I tried leaning in the hardly empty hall closet like an unrustled broom. I tried standing beside a giant field and feeling comically small in comparison. Apropos, did you carry yourself like a kept stack of wet wood to the doctorOs public office? I knowÑI wonÕt mention the coppice stairwell to the bike trail, how Simon tumbled down it like a box of careful feathers. Hold calm if not accountable when we cross paths next. Shelter that tragic grin, that meridian pull of top from bottom lip. Nina, youÕve always carried such dominant hairstyles. Such marvelous October skin.

🚺 SHARE 🚜 📆 🔣 ...

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

Nonfiction

Poetry

Anger

Topography

The Mermaid Behind the Glass

Manuals for Trains

Signs of a Struggle

Covote

from Leafmold

MPG of Wild Boar

Fiction

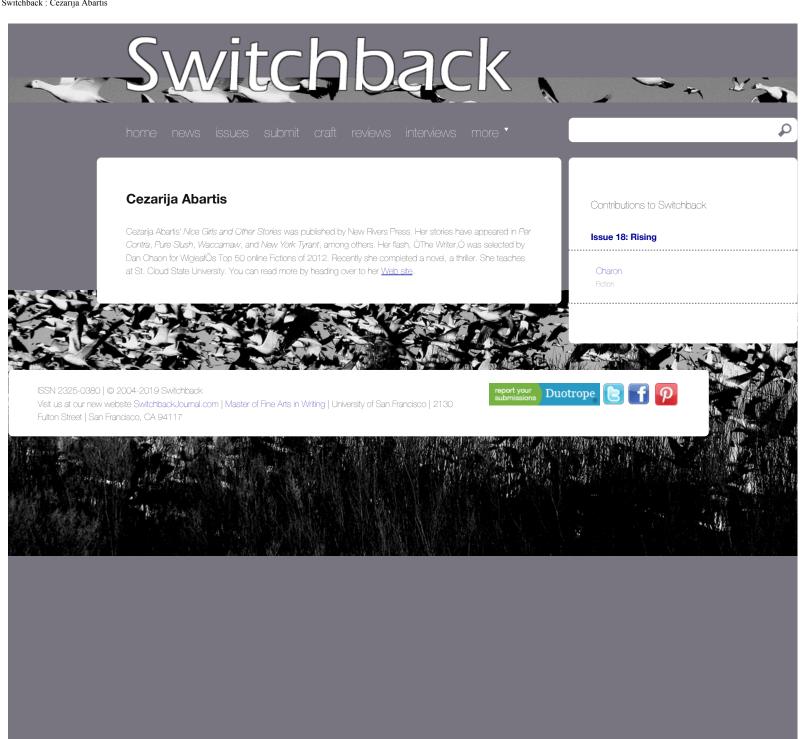












home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

Charon

Cezaria Abartis

I was a child myself once, though you would hardly believe it to look at my bony, old body and ropy arms. I had dreams before I lost my place and ambitions. I settled for this job.

I do the ferrying of the dead across the river. There are plenty harder jobs. Digging ditches and mines, working in a slaughter house breaking bones, but this is monotonous, ferrying the same boat back and forth across the same thick water. I see all kinds: plump merchants, old people, young soldiers, young mothers, the diseasedf\(\)Somehow I don\(\)Ot catch their ailments. Still, the job is hard and sad. It\(\)Os damp here, and there is no sun. Mold everywhere, and I smell of sweat. Bats skitter and screech above; creatures slither in the water.

The saddest thing I ever saw was an old woman shuffling toward the river bank.

With my pole, I held her back from falling in. She was blind. I took her on the next trip. She mumbled thanks and that she missed her husband and did I know him? No.

IOm very hungry. I cannot abide fish. I buy a little bread, olives, winel\u00ednot enough to forget this job. Some people have more: food, desire, ambition. TheyOll come to me, too. I take them to a new place, away from emptiness. There are worse things.

Last week a pretty child with dark eyelashes wanted a ride, the saddest thing I ever saw.

Fine shoulders, long legs, swimmerOs legs, but nobody loved her enough to give her the price of the crossing. I donOt have children myself, but she was a pretty one. Fine hands, I wouldOve thought she was the child of nobility. Maybe she had been and wouldnOt serve her purpose and was now discarded: would not marry the right man, would not listen to her mother, or her father, or her uncle. I couldnOt tell how she diedNpoison, disease, a bug bite; something small was enough to do her in. She was smallNeight or ten years old.

I touched her soft face. Not not like you think. She reminded me of the child I wanted to have once, before tiredness set in, before my back bent toward itself in a hump. But children are a lot of work, too.

I whispered to her, Öl work very hard. Ó Without me, the corpses would be stacked on the shores and their ghosts would cry and wander for a hundred years. I bring them peace.

She reached toward me and didnot understand that I couldnot ferry her across the river if she didnot pay. She wore a white tunic embroidered with laurel leaves at the hem. She stretched her arms and tapped her fingers together in a childos gesture of ogimme. Of She stamped her feet and searched around anxiously and picked up a polished bronze mirror from the ground. She offered it to me and I took it. She mouthed ohome. Of I looked around and saw the King. I couldnot break his rules. Across the river, the Queen had tears in her eyes for the child. I shook my head and turned away. I held up the mirror. The saddest thing I ever saw.

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >
Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Instructions for Failure

Conway Rides

lan Breen

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickernackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitake



Janet Benton



Janet Benton received her MFA in writing from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and has been a professional writer and editor for thirty years and a writing teacher for seventeen years. Her interview with novelist Valerie Martin appeared in *Glimmer Train*. She has co-written documentaries for History Making Productions, and one episode won an Emmy in 2013 for best feature documentary. Through The Word Studio (www.thewordstudio.us), she offers support and guidance to writers. She is currently completing a historical novel and has other novels in the works. "Instructions for Failure" was inspired by a devoted pair of frogs in her backyard.

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 18: Rising

Instructions for Failure

Fiction



Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Day after day the frogs stayed nearly motionless, the male on the femaleOs back, his front legs wrapped around her neck, her front legs dinging to the rim of one of the old bathtubs weOd made into lily ponds.

I worried about those frogs. Humping, hearts thumping. I told you about them as we cooked dinner, and we turned the flames low and stepped into the warm spring darkness to see. You shone a flashlight on them for a long time, too long, and they looked terrified, about to explode, but didnOt move from their posts. Finally, perhaps frightened at the pulsating of the male frogÕs chest, their motionless dark eyes, you turned the sharp light into our eyes. You curved your tall frame over my back and held my neck, simulating their position. You joked, OHow would you like some guy hanging on you for days like that? Ó The truth is I wouldnot have minded, if something permanent had come of it.

We went inside and finished making dinnerNthe fuse in the kitchen had blown again so we cooked by candlelightNand we ate our rice and chicken and greens out back on the redwood table youOd built, candles illuminating our hands as we raised forks to mouths, listening to the frogs glub-glubbing. A big owl screeched, leaving its home at the top of our palm tree for a night of mousing, its wings outspread, its eyes bulging. During the day I often picked up hard packets of mouse skin and teeth and bones at the foot of that tree; I snapped them in half to look at the tiny mouse teeth in rows, the desiccated body. The owl must have strong muscles in its throat or its stomach to squeeze out all the living flesh and blood.

The next morning those two frogs hung in the same position, his pulse fainter, hers submerged. The other tubs weOd made into ponds were empty, their night visitors having easily achieved their intents.

ÒAre they sick?Ó l asked you. ÒCan they eat?Ó

ÒThey wonÕt let themselves die there,Ó you said. Òlt wouldnÕt be natural.Ó

I thought of them while at work, and once home I was relieved to find them moist and alert. But the next morning, as you took your long shower, I walked out with my mug of fragrant tea into the bright heat and they were motionless, their eyes closed, their skin dried out. Only her face and throat protruded above water, and all the rest was hidden by the lily pads surrounding them. At their necks I saw no pulse. I put my hand in the soft water and splashed to moisten his tautening back. No response. Creamy white lilies craned toward me like big ears with roots.

ÒTheyÕre dead,Ó I said to the ears. What could I do with these dead frogs? I could bury them. I could shovel up dirt behind the compost pile and throw them in. But what if they were still alive, even just barely? They would jerk apart in the dirt, get covered with it. Maybe his dry skin would burst open from the fall.

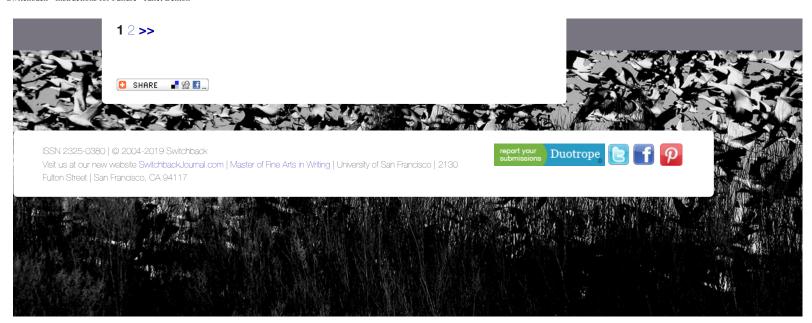
My underarms started dripping. I went through the back door into the kitchen and started measuring oatmeal into a pot. Then I walked to the sink to add water and peeked out the kitchen window, and the frogs were no longer in their place. I pulled open the screen door and ran out. They had moved to the other side of the tub, his heartbeat was visible again, and his right eye twitched while I looked on. His arms were now wrapped under hers, as though holding her up, and then I thought with a start, Is she the dead one? Is he clinging to a corpse, waiting for it to drop eggs? But her webbed hands were outstretched, holding on to the tub. Dead things don Ot hold on, I thought.

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

Art

<Previous Work Next Work > Page 1 of 2 >> Nonfiction Poetry Fiction Charon Conway Rides Recovery and Rehabilitation No More Nickemackin' Specifics of Hell



home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Other frog couples came to the other tubs and stayed the night, making cow-like calls and leaving fertilized eggs behind, but not one ever jumped again into that black tub where the immobile couple floated. I kept going out to look, astounded by their faithfulness to duty, or was it idiocy? Or perhaps they just didnot know what else to do. They had no instructions for failure.

You probably didn'Ot count, but I did. They stayed for fourteen days in April, and then they were gone. I'd carried a magazine outside after work and planned to sit on the grass and read it. Instead, I ended up reading that letter you'Od tucked into the magazine accidentally. By then I almost took the frogs'O company for granted; they had become a sort of company to me. But on that fourteenth afternoon'Nnothing but emptiness in the tub, save the multiplying lilies and the water that reflected back my face, my desperate face. I needed to know. I needed to ask them: How did they know when to give up?

I know they did because nothing swims in that tub. The other tubs hold about ten thousand tadpoles each, really. They appeared about a month ago, tiny black wriggling creatures with no visible eyes, teeming masses pushing against the walls of the bathtub ponds. I could send you a picture. The ponds lose water in this heat so I fill them up in the evenings, and dozens of tadpoles float onto the lily pads. When day comes they dry out in the sun, ink spots on the leaves that the sun burns holes through.

Actually, they seem desperate to get onto those heart-shaped pads when the sun is highest and boring into everything; they push and wiggle their blind fat heads, tails curving like shoe horns, trying to pry themselves onto the pads. They want the light. It destroys them.

In the living room, on the sofa, that Os where I am. Writing you again, this letter I can Ot send because you left no address. Through the huge plate-glass windows I see old man Foster across the street, bent against the side of his house to turn on the faucet. His head is twisted toward the grass, watching for water to sprout from his sprinkler. It emerges feebly at first, but as his hand turns the water lifts taller and leaps to the sky. For seconds each droplet wins out over gravity, becomes the opposite of rain.

Now skinny old Foster is reaching up, one arm in the air, wagging his hand at me. I wave back. He probably hasnÖt had a good meal since his wife passed months ago. I should bring one over, at least once a week I should. But that might make him feel indebted. Sometimes kindness is an imposition. I felt guilty when Mrs. Neilly down the road brought us a beautiful apple pie to welcome us ten years ago, because when was I going to bake a pie in return?

I wonder if Foster smells his wife on her things. Your musky odor used to fill our bed, but I had to wash the sheets. Now even your pillowcase has lost your scent.

You forgot your toothbrush and a few other things. Like your share of what happened, honey. But did you know that people exchange DNA when they\(\tilde{O}\) re physically intimate? And that each fetus becomes a part of its mother forever? So there are still strands of you in me and me in you, changing us, becoming us. Not to mention all the almost-people we engendered, holding on inside me. We all hold on, at a molecular level. You just can\(\tilde{O}\)t see it, honey. You never would see it.

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 2 of 2

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abar

Instructions for Failure

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

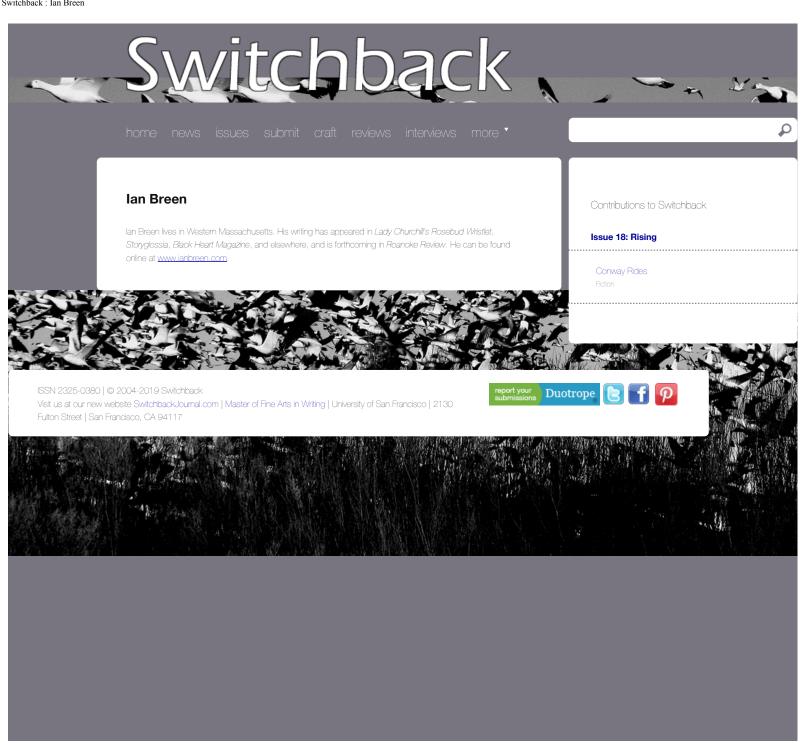
Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitake

Art

<u><< 1</u> 2



Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work Next Work >

Page 1 of 4 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Instructions for Failure

Recovery and Rehabilitation

No More Nickemackin'

Specifics of Hell

Conway Rides

lan Breen

he mechanical horse stands outside the entrance to K-Mart, a stallion on a stalk. It is coated with bright, greasylooking paint that has chipped off in spots to reveal gray metal underneath. One hoof reaches forward in a frozen gallop, and a black electrical cord runs out the rump like a second tail. Conway places his palm on the molded saddle and waits while his mother rummages through her purse for a tissue. He sat on the horse once, years ago, while his father watched with hands in pockets and cigarette pinched between grinning lips. Although he has recently turned nine, the desire to ride it lingers like his father Os smell on the shirts in his closet at home. He is swinging his leg over the horseOs back when his mother glances up and sees him.

ÒConway Martin, get down off there right now.Ó

ÒWhy? ItÕs just a toy." His breath drifts toward the parking lot in a thin cloud.

Òlt could be dangerous. Now get down.Ó

Conway frowns; his mother thinks everything is dangerous. ÒDad would let me ride it.Ó

Her mouth tightens. She turns and walks toward the automatic doors. Conway presses the coin-return button on the money box as he always does with pay phones and vending machines, but no change comes out. He pats the horseOs flank one more time and follows his mother inside. She has pulled a shopping cart from its corral and stands perusing a list taken from the pad stuck to their refrigerator. Although it is only K-Mart, she is wearing a lot of makeup and one of her nicest outfits.

They start down an aisle, Conway trailing slightly behind. His mother takes items from the shelves seemingly at random, examines the prices, and then puts them back. As they reach the end of the aisle, she stops. Without looking up from the box of Brillo pads in her hands, she says, Öl know this is hard for you to hear, Connie, but your father is good-for-nothing. He only cares about himself, not about NO she swallows and tilts her face toward the overhead fluorescents.

He has heard her say things like this many times, long before his father went to jail three months ago. Sometimes, lying in bed at night, he used to hear them arguing in the kitchen. His motherOs shrill voice would rise higher and higher, drowning out his fatherÕs bass rumble and even penetrating the pillow pulled tight around his ears. She seems about to say something more but instead drops the Brillo box into the cart and continues walking.

ConwayÕs father is good for lots of things. He can throw a baseball like a rocket. He can sing, which he likes to do with the lights off and the stereo turned all the way up. He can tell great bedtime storiesÑscary, but not too scary. He can burp louder than anybody at school. He knows the best places to go fishing and how to cook what they catch on the grill.

1234 >>

🖸 SHARE 📑 😭 🚮 ...

ISSN 2325-0380 | @ 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130











home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

Conway Rides

lan Breen

Best of all, if his mother says no to something, his father is almost guaranteed to say yes. He gave Conway the BB gun he wanted for his birthday and showed him a place to hide it behind the woodpile. He also let him join Peewee football after his mother said it was too rough. You have to be bold, his father always says, because you only live once, and taking chances lets you know you one alive.

On the last day he saw his father, Conway took the bus home from school and found him lying on his back on the orange shag rug in their living room. He was listening to music in his underwear, the white t-shirt tucked neatly into the waistband of his boxer shorts. His mother worked late at the dentistÖs office on Thursdays, so it was just the two of them. After a snack, Conway settled down in the corner next to the bookshelves and flipped through his baseball card collection.

When the eight-track started playing ODisco Inferno, Ó his father reached up over his head and cranked the volume. It was one of his favorite songs, with a driving beat and slippery homs; he often played it over and over. OSaaaatisfaction, Ó the singer screamed, Ocame in a chain reaction. I couldnOt get enough, so I had to self-destruct. O The second time through, Conway slid over on his knees and asked, ODad, whatOs a chain reaction?

His father sat up and turned the music down. He looked at Conway as if surprised to see him. After a moment, he said, ÖltÖs when things have gone too far to be stopped. Ó Conway was about to ask how you knew things had gone too far when his father laid a hand on his shoulder.

ÒListen to me, buddy. I want to tell you something. Ó He drew in a deep breath and let it out in a beery sigh. ÒNever let other people Ös failures keep you from trying, okay? Ó

Conway nodded.

ÒJust because someone doesnŌt succeed at somethingÑilke me, maybeÑdoesnŌt mean you canŌt.

Do you understand?Ó

Conway scrunched up his lips and shrugged.

His father swallowed, his AdamÖs apple going up and down like a light switch beneath his stubble. ÒAnd donÖt let your mother turn you into a scaredy-cat. You have to take chances and do what you think you need to do.Ó He smiled and jabbed playfully at ConwayŌs stomach. ÒAnd whyŌs that?Ó

ÒBecause you only live once,Ó Conway said. The next day his father was gone.

In the candy aisle, beckoned by the blaze of colors, Conway asks if he can have some Twizzlers. They don'Ot have the money for treats, his mother says, and besides, he doesn'Ot want to rot his teeth, does he? She'Oll get him some sugar-free gum at the checkout.

Next comes the clothing section, which Conway likes because the haphazard arrangement of gleaming chrome racks resembles a maze. He wanders in and out among them, letting the hanging clothes rub against his face and arms. Sometimes with his father he would wade through a curtain of fabric and hide inside one of the racks. But when he tried it on the last trip here with his mother, instead of searching for him she started yelling his name in a quavering voice. She smacked him when he came out and told him never to do anything like that again.

As they pass a display of NFL team jerseys, they meet Mr. Nelson and his daughter Kayla, who is two grades older and a head taller than Conway. Father and daughter are dressed almost identically: sneakers, dark blue jeans, and ski jackets with dangling lift-tickets. A scarlet headband holds back KaylaÖs beautiful shoulder-

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 2 of 4 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abari

Instructions for Failure

Janet Bentor

Conway Rides

Recovery and Rehabilitation

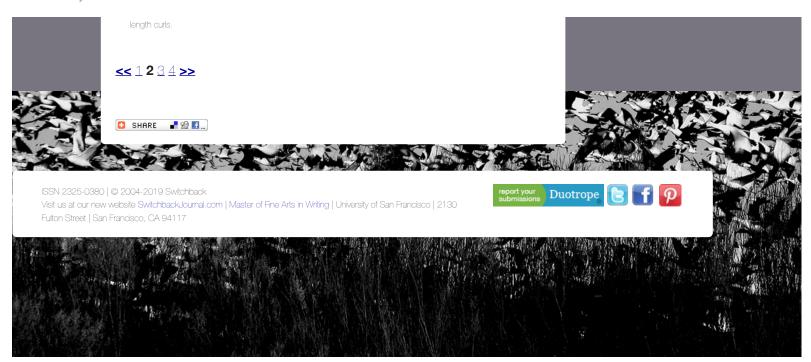
Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker



home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

Conway Rides

lan Breen

Mr. Nelson says, ÒHi, Ginny. How are you?Ó

ÒOh, just fine and dandy. Ó His mother smoothes her hair and smìles without showing her teeth. ÒI mean, vou know. Ó

Mr. Nelson sighs. ÒYeah.Ó

ÒHi, Kayla, Ó Conway says.

ÒHev Ó

Mr. Nelson asks a few questions about things down at Dr. SmolenskyÖs, and then suddenly his mother is crying again. She leans against Mr. Nelson, who hugs her and looks around as if to see who might be watching. Conway runs his fingers over the stitching of a Denver Broncos shirt and tries to pretend heÖs not paying attention.

His mother raises her head and wipes her eyes. ÒlÔm just so embarrassed, Ed, you know? I feel like everyoneÔs laughing behind my back.Ó

Mr. Nelson glances at Conway and Kayla. ÒWhy donŌt you two take a walk and see what kind of board games they have?Ó

Conway thinks his mother will say no; she doesnŌt like him to go off by himself, especially lately. She surprises him, though.

ÒThatÕs a good idea. Connie, meet me near the checkout counter in ten minutes, okay?Ó

He and Kayla head toward the toy section in the rear of the store. He looks back before they turn the corner and sees his mother with her face pointed at the floor and one hand shading her eyes like a visor. They walk slowly, not speaking. As Kayla trails one finger along a shelf stocked with puzzles, Conway studies her profile, pretending to read the names on the cardboard boxes.

After the board games aisle, they come to a wide-open space with rows and rows of bicycles. A line of them lean on kickstands and more hang from hooks by their rear wheels. Whenever his father took him to K-Mart they always came here. Conway would place his nose next to the rubber tires and inhale the smell that was different than new sneakers, yet somehow the same. His father told him that someday he was going to buy him one. ÖWhich do you like today, Con-man?Ó heÖd say, and then help him onto the seat and stand behind him, his scratchy chin resting on ConwayŌs shoulder.

He is searching for his favorite bike when Kayla startles him by saying, OSo what happened to your dad?OShe is smiling slightly.

Conway stuffs his hands into his coat pockets. After a long pause, he says, ÒHe robbed a bank. Ó He expects her to be impressed, like some of the kids at school. Instead, she raises her eyebrows.

ÒOh, yeah? ThatÕs not what my mom told me.Ó

An announcement is playing on the fuzzy overhead speaker, something about a sale on Sunday, and the words seem to tangle with KaylaÖs, confusing him.

ÒWhat do you mean?Ó

ÒShe said he ran off with some rich woman. Ó

Conway stares at her. His fingers twist the loose fabric at the bottom of his pockets savagely. ÒThatŌs a lie! Take it backlÓ

ÒNo,Ó she says, grinning now. Òmy mother doesnŐt lie, so it must be true.Ó She laughs. ÒShe says

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 3 of 4 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abart

Instructions for Failure

Janet Bentor

Conway Rides

Recovery and Rehabilitation

lessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker



Conway Rides

lan Breen

Two days after his father didnÖt come home for dinner, ConwayÖs mother sat him down at the kitchen table and explained what had happened. Her eyes were red and her breath smelled of cigarettes. DHe didnÖt care about either of us,Ó she said, Dso he did something stupid and selfish, and now weDre alone. She said he was in jail in California and it was too far away and too expensive to visit him. He was never coming back.

Through his thundering confusion, Conway felt a tiny flame of anger. ÒBut wasnŌt he just trying to get us money, like you always say when you fight?Ó

She jerked her head back as if sheÖd been slapped. ÒYou know what, Connie? YouÖre right. At least stealing might have gotten us the things we need. But he couldnÖt even do that.Ó

Conway stared down at his hands. After a moment she covered them with her own, the cuticles bitten to raw red flaps. ÖYour fatherÕs gone, honey, but you can count on me.Ó

Perpendicular to the aisle of fishing poles, a long glass display counter runs along the wall. A collection of new reels sits on top, next to assorted sinkers and bobbers in plastic trays. He steps to the counter, which comes up to his chest. His stomach feels fluttery. The clerk is ten feet away showing a bait cart to a fat man wearing a tan vest and a matching hat. When Conway reaches up to take the reel he almost drops it because his palms are so sweaty. He turns it over in his hands, pretending to play with the gleaming knobs and levers, but he can barely feel his fingers. He glances around quickly, heart hammering, and then stuffs it into his pocket.

As he walks back the way he came, Conway waits for a voice to call after him, but he hears nothing except the swish of his corduroys and the muffled chatter of other shoppers. Exhilaration surges through him; he feels like he\(\tilde{O}\)s floating. He heads toward the front of the store, limbs tingling, but just before he gets there he detours to the candy section. Taking the Twizzlers is even easier than taking the reel. He hurries on his way, trying to keep the package from crinkling under his coat.

His mother is waiting for him near the checkout lanes. Her makeup has run, leaving dark, tomado-shaped smudges beneath her eyes. She frowns when she sees him. ÖWhere have you been?Ó

Òl wasÉtalking to Kayla.Ó

ÒYou were?Ć

He swallows. ÒYeah.Ó

ÒAnd what were you talking about?Ó

Conway can feel the weight of the reel in his pocket. ÒFishing.Ó

She looks at him for a moment and then smiles. Òl think someoneÕs got a little girlfriend.Ó

When they check out, his mother forgets about the gum she promised, but Conway doesnÖt care. He just wants her to pay for her Brillo pads and carton of Parliaments so they can leave. The pit has opened in his stomach again, and his feet feel hot. When the cashier opens the register, ConwayÖs eyes fix briefly on the crinkled stacks of bills in the drawer, and then he looks away. The cashier, a tall man with black hair and eyebrows that join together in the middle, seems to stare right at him. Conway wonders if he knows and is just waiting for him to try to escape. Will he swoop down on him before he can get outside? Was that the way it happened with his father?

His mother takes the plastic bag with her items and steps forward so the next person in line can be rung up. She seems to be moving in slow motion. Finally she zips her purse and starts walking. They are almost to the

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 4 of 4

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abar

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Conway Ride

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

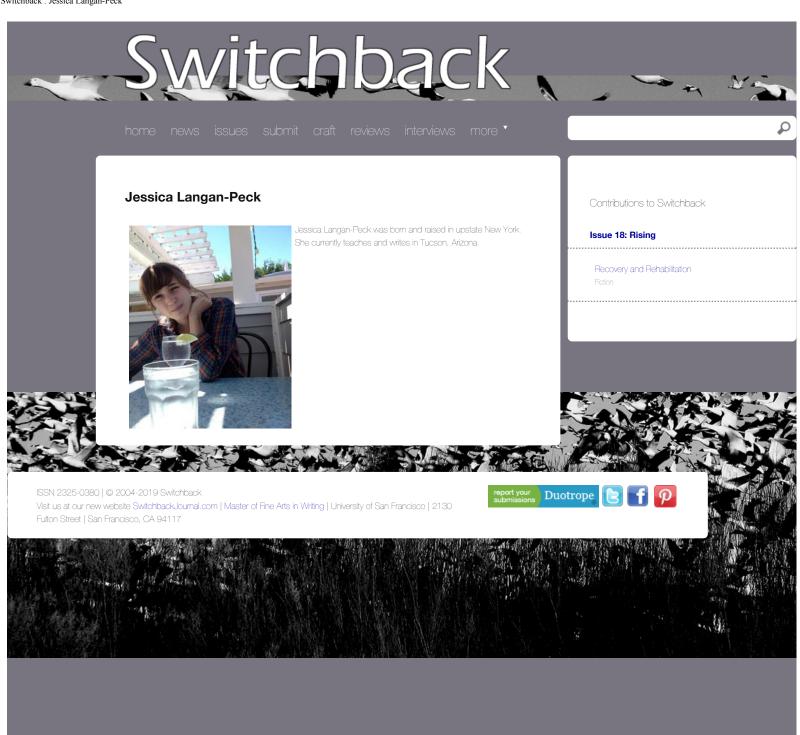
No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitake







Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

Miles and I walked the long way to the restaurant so that he could see the neighborhood a bit. I pointed out that the Laundromat we used to go to had closed, and in its place there was a new coffee shop called Grounded.

Next to that was a fancy deli that sold craft beer. It was bitter cold, early January, and he wasnÖt dressed for it. His wool pea coat was not heavy enough, he had his arms folded in front of him, his head, with its curls that were thinning, was bare. I walked a few feet away from him, talking about this street, about the way that it was changing, had changed, since he had been here last. OThings are just popping up overnight, O I said. I listened to my own voice in the wind

A friend of ours was getting married, a winter wedding with dark flowers and lacy long sleeves on a dress IÖd helped her pick out, and here was Miles flying in from wherever he was on location in Nevada. IÖd like to see you, heÖd said. I shrugged my shoulders against the phone. It had been a long time. The radiators in the apartment were a clanging chorus. When I told the bride to be, Angie, about it the next day she looked into my face for hints that I was lying about feeling okay. She was the same person who, right afterwards, had led me by the hand through the garden sheÖd made on her roof deck. There were pots and rectangular window boxes and raised beds of all shapes and sizes, all filled haphazardly with carrots and radishes and lettuce sheÖd grown from seeds. "Look at these little guys!" she said, and I followed her and nodded and asked her if she thought one could die of this. "ItÖs possible," she said.

When we got to the northeast corner of McCarren Park, he stopped. From across the street, I could see stacks and stacks of discarded Christmas trees, piled up against the low wrought iron fences and against the actual trees in the park, the maples and the beeches.

ÒLook at that, Ó Miles said. ÒThis is where they come to die. Ó

I crossed and he followed me into them. Up close, they were fragrant. There were spruces and white pines, sharp needles and long, soft spikes that hung on or turned brown and fell. There were small trees, the kind that sit on tabletops, and there were ten- or twelve-footers from high-ceilinged lofts and old single-families. In the dark, the trunks still looked wet. The ground was all needles. We touched the trees softly. We walked through them, single file, and they were piled almost to my chest. We let them brush our coats. I breathed in through my nose and I wanted to crawl in amongst them on my hands and knees, the fallen needles sticking to my palms, and sit for a while. Miles had his back to me, had one hand up to his forehead like an explorer, looking over the tops of the tree piles at the few streetlights at the edge of the park. He was shielding his eyes from their glare, noticing, I knew, the cinematic way their thin bodies were pale against the dark of the trees.

Miles chose a cheap sushi place because he said he never got to eat sushi where he lived now. There was an unlimited free sakŽ sign on the way in, and we drank and drank the starchy alcohol while we waited for our food.

 $\label{eq:continuous} \begin{tabular}{l} Oliminal Deliver For the continuous of th$

ÒThatŌs just because you know itŌs made from rice.Ó Míles had his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands. He looked at me. ÒYou need some sleep.Ó

12345>>

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work >

Page 1 of 5 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abart

Instructions for Failure

. lanet Renton

Conway Rides

lan Bree

Recovery and Rehabilitation

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker



Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

I made a face at him. I had been staying up late with Angie, addressing envelopes, choosing centerpieces, making seating charts, or else tossing and turning next to the radiator in my studio, where I was living now. ÖNever tell a lady she looks tired. O My body always warmed up in the same way when I drank sakŽ, starting near my stemum and moving out. The sides of the little cup got sticky. There was a time when Miles would have fed me a piece of his sushi across the table, and I would have taken it, embarrassed, hoping the other people in the restaurant werenŌt watching. There was a time when I would have held my hand in front of my mouth while chewing. I looked at him now, at the way I could see his forehead through his curls, and I wanted to reach across and lift the hair and expose the hairline that was moving back. We had agreed: no reminiscing. Inside jokes? I couldnŌt remember them anyway. Me: thinner, softer. Miles; balder, shorter.

While we waited, I drew diagrams of the round reception tables on a napkin and he leaned across the table to look. DWhere am I sitting? Miles asked. I said I didn'Dt remember. I drew a picture of my dress, with its one shoulder and strange diagonal neckline. Dit makes me look like origami, D I said.

Leaning on his elbows, he laughed.

ÒHowÕs your family, Ó I said.

He didnÖt answer right away and I noticed our little carafe of sakŽ, with its graceful neck, was empty and I looked for the waitress. I was checking him for signs of muscle memory, for leaning forward, for touching my arm. I was checking myself. She brought another carafe and we poured, clinked, to weddings, to our friend, to letting bygones be gone.

He said his parents, in their dotage (they said), were driving each other crazy at the farm, but that everyone was hanging tough. I talked about work when I knew he really just wanted to hear about my brother, whom he loved. Finally, I said, ÖHeÖs doing well. HeÖs keeping bees now, at our cousinsŌ on Long Island.Ó

Here was Miles animated. ÒYouÕre kidding! ThatÕs fantastic. Can I go? IÕm going, tomorrow.Ó

ÖSure, Ö I said. ÖlÖll call him and ask. Ö My brother was living in the house that had been our mother Ös in Southampton. He was starting an apiary, he said, for the people of New York, because people in cities love that kind of thing. It was true, he Öd just been written up in a locavore blog. He was still fucked up from the winter before, when he left the hives outside and every bee died. He was letting his beard get wild. I knew if I called him he would take a long time to answer the phone, and he would talk slowly, and he would sound surprised to hear from me

When the food came we put it into our mouths quickly, working and working the big pieces of rice and fish and seaweed until they were swallowable. Het the tips of my boots touch the tips of his under the table, because we were cold, because IÖd drank on an empty stomach. I tried to remember what it had been like when IÖd seen him before. It could have been in the park, with our knees up, him telling me the pavement burn scar on my knee was the same color as my eyelids sometimes, or it could have been at an ill-fated party in Bushwick where he told me my scarf matched my toenail polish and I shook hands with his new girlfriend. Instead of talking, we chewed and listened to the couple next to us, who, it seemed, were on a date. The girl was Asian, small and very pretty, and the boy was bearded and wearing flannel. DiÖm so relaxed right now, O he was saying. Difeel like there is a warm washcloth on my brain, between my brain and my skull. O I kicked Miles under the table to see if he Dd

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work >

<< Page 2 of 5 >>

Nonfiction Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezaria Abartis

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

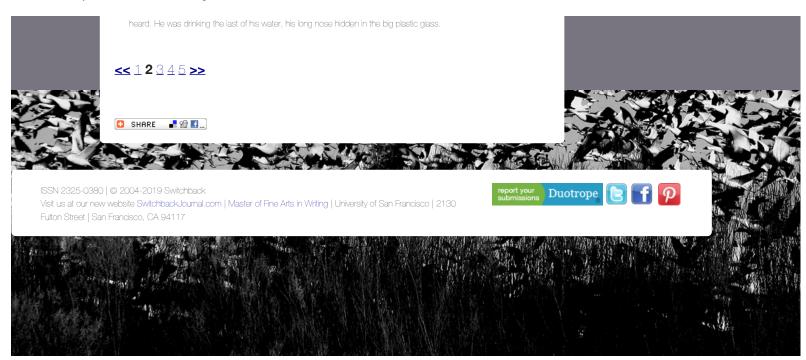
Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitake





Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

After, we wanted either candy or donuts. We stood in the street deciding. On the left was the Dunkin'

Donuts where you got two glazed donuts for the price of one after a certain time of night, secretly, with a significant look from the Indian proprietress. Across the street was our favorite Rite Aid, the one that had been a theater and then a dance club.

ÒM&M's, Ó I said, Òpeanut butter. Ó

Miles preferred the regular peanut ones because at least he was eating an actual nut. We went into Rite Aid and walked past the registers, down the sloping floor past 50% off Christmas decorations and huge garbage bags filled with tinsel and exploded yogurts and smushed Reese's. The sloped floor led down to a little landing, with a railing, and we stood at it and watched the store open up, high-ceilinged, with neat rows of shelves and aisles like a maze, or more like a grid. We could see people moving through the aisles with red shopping baskets. There were maybe thirty more feet of ceiling above where the shelves of greeting cards and dental floss stopped. We went down into the grid and walked around. There was still a mirrored disco ball in the center of the high, domed ceiling. I looked up at it with my arms open and did a slow, turning dance that almost made me lose my balance completely. Miles put his hand on my lower back reflexively, steadying, and we went to the candy aisle.

Back in the street we stood across from each other, swaying slightly, shivering. He was staying with our friend Jeremy in Prospect Heights. I did not want him to go. It didn'Ot feel like sex. It was something else, some other kind of proximity.

ÒWe could go sit on my roof,Ó I said. I had moved out of the building with the phenomenal roof six months ago, and I was sleeping on the lumpy chaise lounge in my studio behind my landlordŌs back, but I still had the keys to my old place.

He nodded. His shoulder blades were moving in and towards one another. He was cold, but he was not going to say so. Òl always love that roof-view.Ó

We walked, close together but not touching, all the way along McCarren Park, which was darker and quieter now, and we were both thinking about Christmas trees. I told him how Angela had been taping up the RSVP cards for weeks. The wall of the kitchen in her apartment was covered with the little rectangular pieces of heavy-stock paper, neutral, wintry colors, which she and I had stamped with the silhouette of a bare tree. The steam heat in her apartment was making the edges curl and the effect was something like a flock of little square birds, or boxy, flying beetles.

When we got to the kicked-looking door in the converted warehouse building on North Ninth, I thought about telling him IÖd moved out, thought he probably had already heard from Angie or someone, so I just opened the door, and let him follow me up the six flights of stairs to the roof. The stairwell was cement, functional feeling. I always thought about it being a grain elevator, or something similar, when I panted up and down the stairs. I was out of breath and trying to hide it.

ÒSmoking again?Ó Míles said, from behind me. I d'dnŌt answer him. ÒlŌve been climbing,Ó he offered. ÒThat might be something youŌd enjoy.Ó

I pushed open the heavy door at the top of the building and waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark, to the cold, and Miles stopped behind me. I felt his breath on my neck. Stairs were hard even if you were in great shape. I walked carefully, the roof was full of all kinds of obstacles, and I was still feeling hot and loopy from all the sakž even

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 3 of 5 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abari

Instructions for Failure

lanot Ronton

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

though it was very cold up there, exposed and windy. I pulled my hat down lower. Someone had built a crude wooden deck on the roof, where there were picnic tables covered with plastic for the winter and a big old charcoal barbecue. In the summer weOd all come up here almost every night, invited more friends over, stashed bottles of liquor behind air vents, laid down on our bellies and looked into skylights for shapes or shadows of the people who lived on the top floor. We sat down on the edge of the deck and dangled our legs. We looked at the view. From up here, in the wind, you could see all of midtown Manhattan tall and lit: the Empire State Building, still green and red from Christmas, the sparkly Chrysler, the New YorkerÖs neon. The East River was black and quietly lapping, not looking anything like water. Miles was seeing it as if it were the first time, I thought, or he was remembering Fourth of Julys,

watching the fireworks on lucky years they were here and not over the Hudson. Once weOd put on a music festival, all of our friends in dirty t-shirts, all of us sweaty and lying in the sun with our winter-white skin.

<< 1 2 **3** 4 5 >>

🖸 SHARE 📑 😭 🚮 ...







Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

Miles held up his arm, in his pea coat, and flexed it. Oclimbing, Ó he said.

I felt it, squeezed weakly. ÖTell me about the red rocks. Ó He was shooting a documentary outside of Nevada, in the Mojave, where the rocks were actually orange, and huge, and craggy, and where Miles climbed the faces of them with his ropy arms and legs. I could see him from the ground, clinging to the sides of things, smiling in the expensive wraparound sunglasses he wore when he was working or doing outdoorsy things. He talked about the film and the camera he was using and the guys on his crew who I might remember because he met them here, but none of the names sounded familiar. I couldnÖt concentrate because my hands were getting cold, turning white and stiff inside my mittens. I had bad circulation and Miles knew it and I almost took off my mitten to show him, to remind him, just to hold out my hand with its white, numb fingers and the mottled red rest of them. I could see that MilesÖs lips were moving but also that they were starting to look purplish. They were cracked from the cold, from the dry Mojave wind, the neat vertical lines that made his lips look permanently puckered.

ÒMIÑÓ I interrupted him. He moved his chapped lips together, then apart, in a strange grimace. ÒDonŌt do that. YouŌll get splits.Ó And I stood up, stiff and teetering on the edge of the deck. He stood, too, on the surface of the actual roof, below me. I held the elbow of his coat. There was a time when the way his name sounded, Mi, My, Mine, would not have been lost on me.

ÒHereŌs something,Ó I said. The space behind my nose and eyes was too cold. Next to me, his teeth were moving, and he was trying to clench his jaw to make them stop. Òl donŌt live here anymore.Ó

ÒYou donÕt.Ó

ÒNo. I moved into my studio. Ó I held up the key, shaking it. ÒBut. Ó

The look that came and went on his face, even in the cold, even in the dark, was familiar. A widening of the eyes, a tightening of the face, a slight shake of the head. This meant he was dismayed but that he was trying to hide it. You just donôt think about other people, he used to say. Or, what youôre saying is irrational. I stood in front of him, dangling the key, bouncing up and down on my toes. The windows in my old apartment had been dark for two days. I walked by it every day on my way from the train to the studio, and I looked up at them.

Òl donŌt think sheŌs home,Ó I said. ÒlŌve been paying attention.Ó I wanted to see what sheŌd done with the place. I wanted to sit with Miles, and I couldnŌt bring him to my studio, because I was ashamed to be squatting there, because sometimes my landlord, who was a graphic designer, worked late there on Sunday nights, and I had to wait until he left.

Miles stood very still, looking past my face at the buildings and lights and water behind me. Then, quickly, he grabbed my chin with gloved fingers and pulled my face down towards his. ÒThat is something, Ó he said, Òyou might have mentioned before now. Ó

I waited, blinking. I felt impervious to his disappointment. Up here the wind was picking up and lifting my hair and blowing it. Going into my ears and up my nose, the kind of air that was so cold that breathing it changed the temperature of the insides of my nostrils. He gave my face a little shake and dropped his hand, the impressions of thin-gloved fingers in my jaw. He was sad. About us, about the way that I was doing in general, I wasnŌt sure. He turned and I followed him down the stairs.

First we knocked, and when there was no answer, I slid the key in the lock. It still worked. I had thought for a second it might not. In the apartment the air felt tropical and close and it smelled like garbage, like steam heat, like

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 4 of 5 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abar

Instructions for Failure

. lanet Renton

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker





Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

We were quiet and efficient, we mostly left the lights off, we stood side by side in front of the refrigerator, in its light, looking at the old cilantro rotting upright in a glass of water, at the cheese in wax paper, at the Tupperware containers. It looked like she hadnot been home in awhile. I wouldnot let him eat a pickle from the almost-empty jar on the bottom shelf. There was a half-eaten chocolate bar in the space for the butter and we ate it standing up, biting it with our molars because it was too hard for our front teeth, which were sensitive to the cold. We warmed up, took off our hats and gloves, took off our coats. Milesos cheeks turned red.

ÒLooks good in here, Ó Míles said. He sat down on the couch.

I was nervous, suddenly, hearing all sorts of sounds in the stairwell. Dit looks okay. It looks kind of put together for my taste. O The radiators hissed, her clock ticked, a group of loud kids walked by outside. Even on a Sunday, there were girls in high-heeled snow boots all over this neighborhood.

Miles lay down on the couch, his shoes hanging off the end. He clasped his hands over his stomach and closed his eyes. ÓSo, we go to see Charles tomorrow?Ó

I stood away from him, holding my elbows. I thought about us on the train, sitting next to each other and looking straight ahead, heads back in uncomfortable angles on the worn out seats. Once Miles had asked someone to switch seats on the train, so that we could sit together. We had been going upstate to visit a friendOs parents, and heOd been on a shoot the night before and was exhausted. The woman moved, and he sat down next to me, and I said that was nice, baby, and he said itOs more for me, so that I can lie down and put my head in your lap and get some sleep. He smiled. I hit his upper arm with my knuckles. Long Island in winter was a quiet, snower place, with small towns that were dark and empty and kept their Christmas decorations up all year, beaches with half-frozen sand. My brother, with his beard, wearing a hat inside because he was too cheap to turn up the heat, a roomful of beehives. MilesOs eyes were still closed.

Òl donŌt think so,Ó l said. ÒWedding stuff. You can go, lÕll give you ChuckŌs number.Ó He nodded like heŌd probably do it. He probably would.

And then, while he was lying there with his hands clasped like someone dead or dying, I took off my shoes and my coat and left them in the middle of the living room, and I went to the couch and lay down on top of him. I did it carefully, lined up our legs, kept my movements slow and steady, until we were chest to chest. His eyelids flickered, then opened. Finally, now that I was inches away from his face, I could remember him. First he was very still, and then he put his arms around me, his hands in the middle of my lower back. I can get up, I wanted to say. Or, this isnÔt what it seems. We rose, we fell. After awhile, he breathed like he was sleeping, and even though I wasnÔt and couldnÔt, I matched my breaths with his and found it was a good way to relax. HeÕd had a long, cold day. He always said your body had to work harder in the cold, to keep itself warm, and thatÔs why he was so much more tired in the winter.

I closed my eyes, opened them, listened to the buzz of the refrigerator, which IÖd been used to when I lived here, but which sounded loud now, tasted the old dry sakŽ in my mouth, thought about recovery and the rehabilitation of Miles and me. In a few days I would be wearing this dark dress like a kind of paper crane and he and I would dance at the wedding, we had always been good dancers, because of the way we gave each other enough space to move.

After an hour, or a few hours, I heard the heavy door close downstairs and then someone coming up, the

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 5 of 5

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abar

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

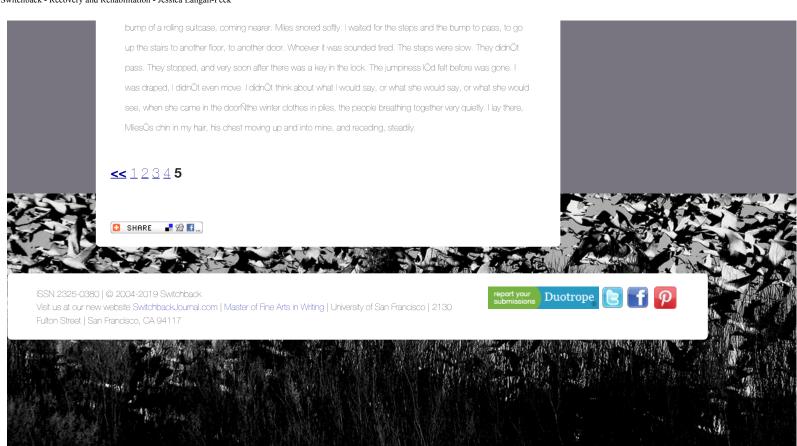
Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Obourn

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitake







No More Nickernackin'

Peter Obourn

When Ada died, Bill went into a funk. All he did, weather permitting, was sit on the bench in front of Waltős Diner and look at his feet. We figured heőd snap out of it, but after a year, he was getting worse instead of better.

One rainy day, we were sitting in our booth. Molly was behind the counter, topping off the sugar dispensers. Walt sat on his stool at the cash register, reading the paper. Bill hollered out, ÖHey, Walt, how about another cup?Ó

ÖlÖll handle this, Ó said Molly. She walked up to our booth, then put her hands on her hips. She winked at me and cleared her throat. Bill was examining his fingernails. She tapped his bald head with her pencil. He looked up. ÒGet it yourself, you old buzzard, Ó she said. ÒWhere the hell you think you are, Howard Johnson Os? Ó

Bill just sat there.

He even stopped mowing his lawn. His Toro rusted in the middle of the yard until only the push bar showed above the grass.

Another morning, Molly was pouring Bill a refill. Oil see you moved your house into a wheat field, O she said.

Bill just nodded and walked out to his bench, carrying his steaming mug.

Molly stuck her pencil in the hole in her hair and walked over to our booth, her fists shoved down in her apron. ÒSee that?Ó she said. ÒYou guys got to do something. I give up.Ó

So, based on an idea Roy had, we decided on an intervention Nike they do on guys who can Ot stop drinking. Walt was in on it too.

ÒWhen we did it to my uncle, Ó said Roy, Òhe cried. Ó

We came out of the diner. I sat on one side of him and Norland on the other. Roy was behind the bench.

Walt and Molly stood in front. Bill looked up at the little crowd surrounding him. ÖWhatÖs up?Ó he said.

ÒlÕll tell you whatÕs up,Ó said Walt, shaking a fat finger in BillÕs face. ÒYouÕre scarinÕ my customers sittinÕ here like the village idiot all day.Ó

ÒThis is an intervention, Ó said Roy.

ÒA what?Ó said Bill.

ÒYou useless freeloader, Ó said Norland. ÒYou sit on WaltÖs bench all day, except you go home for lunch. What the hellÖs that? This is a diner, where youŌre supposed to eat lunch and pay for it. Ó He waved his arms for effect.

ÒYeah, Ó said Roy.

ÒBill, you got to stop your nickernackinÕ and mow your goddamn lawn,Ó I said.

Bill just got up and slowly walked away from us. ÒGeez,Ó he said.

Òl think it worked, Ó said Roy.

ÒSure it did, Ó said Molly.

Next morning, Bill got into his 1980 white Cadillac Eldorado with 22,000 miles, still with the ÖILOVADAÓ license plate, and drove right past the dineri\(^{1}\)didn\(^{0}\)t even stop for breakfast.

He honked. I waved.

Norland, Roy, and I sat in our booth waitinÕ for him to come back.

ÒMusta gone to Utica to buy a lawn mower, Ó said Norland.

 $\grave{\text{O}}\text{That don} \check{\text{O}}\text{t}$ take three days, $\acute{\text{O}}$ said Roy. $\grave{\text{O}}\text{Maybe}$ we ought to go look for him. $\acute{\text{O}}$

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

Page 1 of 5 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezanja Abar

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Conway Rides

lan Breen

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickernackin' Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitake



No More Nickernackin'

Peter Obourn

So thatÕs all we could do. For over a month, we didnÕt hear nothinÕ. Then one day my phone rang, and before I could even say hello, I hear, ÒWhere the hell you been? I been callinÕ you for two days.Ó

ÒThat vou. Bill?Ó I said.

ÒYep.Ó

ÒWhere are you?Ó

ÒListen,Ó he said, Òl need a favor.Ó He asked me to pick up his mail, watch the house, pay the bills; heÕd pay me when he got back.

I said okay, because what else could I say? ÒWhere the hell are you?Ó I said.

ÒHang on a minute. Ó I could hear him talking to someone, then he said, ÒEmerson, Iowa. Ó

ÒAre you with someone?Ó

ÒWhatÕs that supposed to mean?Ó he said. Then he hung up.

Even though I knew IÕd never see the money again, I paid the bills that had to be paid and threw out the junk mail. In among his mail pile were two picture postcards.

l always figured itÕs okay to read other peopleÕs postcards. Anyway, this was now a true mystery, so l took them down to WaltÖs. Walt, Roy, and Norland were huddled in the booth looking at another picture postcard Ñthis one from IowalÑwhich had been addressed to Bill, c/o WaltÕs Diner, Forgeville, New York, handwritten, but every letter beautifull Nourved and slanted exactly the same Nike one of those fancy wedding invitations.

So we had three postcards, as follows:

ÒOak tableÓ postcardlÑan oak table sitting in front of an adobe restaurant. According to the card, the table was made from a two-hundred-year-old oak tree. It said: ÒDear Billy: This here is the only thing in the USA older than you. Ha-ha,Ó and it was signed ÒM.Ó

ÒGreen bottleÓ postcardlÑa green wine bottle from Sterling Winery, Napa Valley, California. You could see the vineyard in the background. It said: ÒHereÕs that bottle of wine I owe you. It was fun. Love, Marjorie.Ó

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 2 of 5 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Charon

Instructions for Failure

Conway Rides

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Specifics of Hell

<< 1 **2** 3 4 5 >>



ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117











home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

No More Nickernackin'

Peter Obourn

ÒTwo menÓ postcardl\u00f6two men in old-fashioned suits that fit too tight, standing stiff next to a 1936 Chrysler. The car was in front of a white house with a wide porch. This was the one with the pretty handwriting: \u00f61 hope this reaches you. I don\u00f6t know your address, but you talked a lot about Walt\u00f6s Diner, so I am hoping he will be kind enough to pass it along to you. You liked this picture of the house so much, I thought I\u00f6d send one to you. I hope you are feeling better and arrive home safely. Sincerely, Harriet Spencer,\u00f6 it read.

Norland was studying the Ötwo menÓ postcard. Walt had the Ògreen bottleÓ postcard in one hand, and was looking over NorlandÖs shoulder.

ÒLove, Ó said Walt. ÒMine says Ôlove, Õ Norland. Yours just says Ôsincerely. ÕÓ

ÒLet me see that, Ó said Norland, and he grabbed the Ògreen bottleÓ postcard away from Walt. Norland studied it carefully, then handed it back to Walt. ÒHumph. Not very romantic.Ó

Òlt says love, donŌt it?Ó said Walt.

Òl donŌt care if it does; it ainŌt romantic,Ó said Norland. ÒMineŌs romantic.Ó

Roy was studying the Òoak tableÓ card. He kept muttering ÒM.Ó

ÒYou thinkinÕ what lÕm thinkinÕ?Ó said Norland.

ÒWhat?Ó said Roy.

ÒCould be,Ó I said, then Walt and I looked at each other, shook our heads, and said ÒnahÓ at the same time

We studied and we discussed the cards almost every day until the Otwo menÓ postcard got kind of limp. Roy made such a mess out of the Oak tableÓ card, we had to take it away from him. Then he made a whole list of OMÓ names. He made us vote. It came out OMaryÓ if it was a girl, and OMtchÓ if it was a man.

ÒSay what you like, Ó said Norland, waving the Òtwo menÓ postcard. ÒYou need to read between the lines.Ó

Roy looked hard at the card. ÒBetween what lines?Ó he said. Molly strolled over.

ÒSo, what do you think?Ó I asked her.

Òl think, boys,Ó she said, Òthat something happened in Iowa.Ó

Then, one day in late September, he was back.

He drove up to Waltos and sat on the bench like heod never left. The Cadillac had 56,000 miles, one long dent all along the passenger side and one on the trunk. Looked like a moose kicked it, then sat on it. He was still wearing that old brown cardigan with the same smells.

I walked right up and put my foot up on the bench. OWhere the hell you been? O I said.

ÒThe question is, Ó he said, ÒhowÖd I ever find my way home. Ó He patted the bench, then looked down and rubbed it with his hand. ÒLetŐs see now. First, I decided I had to stop nickemackinŐ, as you put it. So I decided to go to that new casino, ÔTurning RockŐ or whatever itŐs called, down near Rome. Ó

ÒSo you went gambling.Ó

ÒWell, not exactly. I couldnÓt find the place, but you guys said I had to do something, so I just kept going.Ó He shrugged and looked at me. ÒThen I come home.Ó

ÒTell me about it,Ó I said. ÒWhere did you go?Ó

He sat and thought. ÒWell, not sure exactly where I went. Stayed in some real nice places.Ó

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 3 of 5 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezaria Abartis

Instructions for Failure

. Janet Rentor

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackir

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

We showed him his postcards. He acted proud, especially of the Ötwo menÓ postcard, but he didnÔt say much, except to ask how they got so beat up. ÒLooks like someone was chewinŐ on this one,Ó he said. ÒltŌs all taped up.Ó

ÒNorland did that, Ó said Roy. Norland looked at Roy, but let it go at that.

Walt pinned the postcards up next to the cash register, and Bill let them stay there, like showing off his grade school homework.

We werenŌt getting to the bottom of anything this way, so one day I carefully picked up the Òoak tableÓ postcard. ÒSo Bill,Ó I said, Òyou went to Yardley, New Mexico?Ó

ÒThat card from there?Ó

ÒYep.Ó

ÒThen I went there.Ó

ÒTell me about it.Ó

He looked at the card. OHot, Ohe said.

I heard him telling Walt about the Ögreen bottleÓ postcard. ÖPretty country out there,Ó he said.

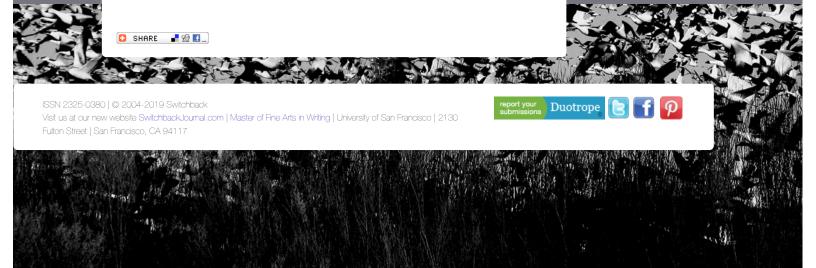
Roy said it was no wonder he didnŌt have much to say. ÒHe left with a new Caddy, and now all heŌs got is a beat-up old sedan and three postcards.Ó

ÒWhen you going to harvest your lawn? Ó said Norland.

Bill looked out of WaltÖs plate-glass window. The maple tree was bright yellow. ÖKinda late for that now,Ó said Bill.

As the leaves got knocked off the trees, BillÖs stories got a little longer. Some detail snuck in. ÒHereÖs a B & B I stayed at,Ó he said, holding the Òtwo menÓ postcard. ÒI always went to little towns, where I wasnŌt so confused. They donŌt call them rooming houses anymore. TheyŌre called B & BsÑwant your eyeteeth for a room. One had a bathtub called a ÔJacuzzi.Ō You turn it on and water shoots all over the place.Ó

<< 1 2 **3** 4 5 >>



home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

No More Nickernackin'

Peter Obourn

awav. Ó said Rov.

When the whine of snowmobiles filled the air and the days got shorter, Bill started drifting back into his funk.

ÖHe stares at that dang postcard like them two guys were going to start up that Chrysler and drive

We were sitting in our booth. It was late, after nine oOclock, and we were the only ones left. Molly had gone home. Walt brought us each a bowl of bean soup, and one for himself. He pulled a chair over and sat at the end of the table. Steam rose from the bowls as he dumped a pile of oyster crackers on the table.

ÒFinish it up, boys,Ó said Walt. ÒOn the house.Ó A gust blew the snow so hard it sounded like sand hitting the plate glass. The soup was as thick as pudding.

Norland walked over to the cash register, came back with one of the cards, and slid in next to Bill. Roy squeezed a fistful of cracker crumbs into and around his bowl, then slurped a mouthful.

ÒYou know,Ó said Norland, poking his finger at the postcard, Òmy uncle had a Chrysler like this one, only it was green, as I recollect. Used to drive up from Unadilla.Ó

ÖMy room was in this turret here, Ó said Bill. Öl got sick there. She kept asking who to call and I said, Öl ain Öt dyin Ö yet. No need for a two-dollar phone call. Ö She took care of me for a week. Played the piano for me in the evening. Ó

 $\grave{\text{O}}\text{Always}$ had Fords myself, $\acute{\text{O}}$ said Roy. $\grave{\text{O}}\text{Reliable}.\acute{\text{O}}$

Bill looked at the card as if it were a window into lowa. He sighed. ÖActually, this is an old black-and-white photo she had colored up and made into a postcard. Clever womanNused to be a piano teacher. That thereOs her house which, as I said, is now her B & B. See these two men. This oneOs her first husbandNwith the capN and his brother next to him, who also happens to be her second husband. They look alike but theyOre not twins. Both dead now.Ó

We had our heads down over our warm bowls. I raised my head in time to catch NorlandÖs eye.

Spring finally came, as it always does in ForgevillelNeventually. Wildflowers bloomed in the warm breeze.

BillÖs lawn came up tall and beautiful and smelled sweet.

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 4 of 5 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abari

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Conway Rides

lan Bree

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

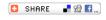
No More Nickernackin' Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

Art

<< 12345>>



ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117

report your submissions

Duotrope







home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

No More Nickernackin'

Peter Obourn

One day in May, the sun shone so hot youOd swear it was summer already.

Around noontime, Roy and I were sittinO on BillOs bench, soaking up the sun. A big, new white car, a Lexus, drove up to WaltOs and out stepped a lady in a white dressNreal stylishNtight down to her ankles. She had to take little steps.

The sun was so bright that white dress looked blue. It had lace on top. She wore a white hat. She was maybe our age but spry, life in her eyes. She went into WaltŌs and stood waiting until Walt smartened up and showed her to a booth.

Then I noticed Roy was pointing at the car, like it was a ghost.

ÒWhat?Ó I said. Then I saw it, tooÑCalifornia plates

California. Love, Marjorie.

I slapped my head. Bill wasnÕt there.

 \grave{O} Go get Norland, \acute{O} I said. Roy shuffled off. I called Bill from Walt $\~{O}$ s phone booth. It took him a while to get there. Norland, Roy, and I sat in our booth across from her. She looked at us a couple times and smiled, but none of us said anything. We didn $\~{O}$ t want to be obtrusive or anything.

Molly was acting like a real waitress, standing up straight and saying, Öyes, maÖam,Ó and, Öwould you like to see the dessert menu?Ó and actually writing stuff down.

By the time Bill got there, the lady in white was on her tapioca pudding.

I donŌt think Bill had ever been so clean in his life. ThatŌs what took him so long. Walt looked up and whistled. Bill went right to the booth and sat down across from the lady in white.

Roy jabbed me. ÒLook,Ó he whispered. They were holding hands across the table.

Norland nodded. ÒYup,Ó he said.

Finally, she stood and smoothed her dress. Bill hadnŌt eaten anything. She took his arm. They drove away in the Lexus.

A half hour later, they pulled up again. She was driving. He rolled down his electric window, waved me over, and handed me his key chain. ÖltÖs a good thing I didnÖt mow that lawn,Ó he said.

ThatÕs about the whole story.

Never saw him again.

ExceptiÑone more thing. A few months later, near the end of August, another big, new white car pulled up Ña Chrysler Imperial, another lady.

Right away we looked at the platesÑlowa.

Not as sharp as the lady in white. I donŌt remember what she had on, but this one looked more like a piano teacher.

She noticed the Òtwo menÓ postcard pasted next to WaltÖs cash register. She asked Walt where he got it, but we knew she knew. We had to tell her that Bill was gone. We didnŌt tell her whereÑjust didnŌt have the heart.

ItOs hot again this summer. I suppose BillOs sitting on a porch somewhere in California with the lady in white, sipping wine. And that piano teacher in lowa, sheOll be sitting, too, on that wide front porch of her B & B, waiting for a cool breeze. SheOll never know about the lady in white who came out of nowhere, like the summer

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 5 of 5

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abarti:

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

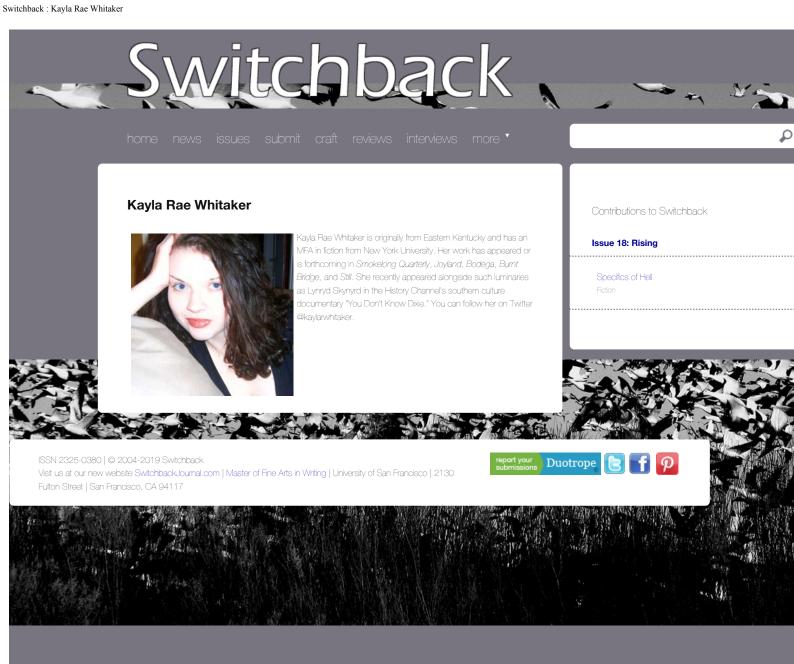
Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitake





home news issues submit craft reviews interviews more

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

I masturbated for the first time after watching OThe Red Shoe DiariesO at Brian TolsonOs house. I was eleven.

We watched it on stolen HBO, channel 99, spelled out in large electric red blocks on the little tan cable box. I donOt remember the storyline, but I probably didnOt remember it directly after I saw it, either. All I remembered was a man and a woman collapsing together, the man sort of pushing the woman into a wall, too, and her falling with him, their mouths moving together deeper and wetter than I saw on regular television. Then his mouth plunging to her neckline, her back arching, slip strap sliding down her arm, the manOs hand reaching to lift out one pale, perfect breast. Then his thumb rolling slowly over the nipple. The woman made a deep, guttural sound, and it was the most authentic thing I had ever heard, and it made me wonder what else I had been kept from seeing and hearing in my life.

And they began grinding at each other in a way that was deep and unhurried and heated, and I could feel the electricity shooting down my spine. It was just me and Brian watching this, and Brian had seen it before. He was attempting to jimmy open a Transformer that had gone into capsule state and stayed that way, so his attitude was pretty much like, Öyeah, okay, heŌs got her boob out.Ó But I was transfixed. I also had wood. I excused myself.

I crouched over and did it in BrianOs momOs bathroom, smelling her vanilla hand cream and Virginia Slims in the air, and when I was done, I was horrified, exhilarated, strangely wrung out. I had no idea I was capable of feeling what I had felt.

I didnOt sleep the entire week after, but I didnOt stop, either. The woman kept flashing through my head, leaning against the wall, breast out, pumping. I started hoarding Kleenex in my room and locking my door. I was positive that the stuff that came out of me was making my room smell different, that my parents would know. I doused everything with my motherOs country apple room spray, making everything sour-flowery. It felt so good while it was happening, but afterward, anything was better than that smell of wrongdoing of which I, alone, was quilty.

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

Page 1 of 8 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abart

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitake

٨н

12345678>>



ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117











Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

We were called the United Church for Steady Faith in Jesus Christ. Our minister was Ralph Tolliver, three-term mayor, farmer, and patriarch of a family that spread into the next county. He had a big belly, round and hard. His grandkids ran around the yard after service, bumping off of his gut. When our dads gave him their attention, they gave him all of their attention. At church suppers, he liked fresh buttered corn the best and ate it right off the cob, salt and juice running down his chin.

That our church used the word for and not of was a point of contention among the organized. OweOre finally gonna stand for something, OMr. Tolliver explained to us in sermon in our newly constructed church, built after our split from United Baptist concerning a small vagary relative to original sin. At United, Halloween was banned and the church hosted OSaints NightO for kids instead. When James Mark bobbed for apples, I kicked him in the butt. It was the first time I smiled all night.

This was during the Gulf War. In school, they gave us pencils that read, \dot{O} Peace in the Middle East. \dot{O} There were maps of green and brown detailing Iraq, troop deployment patterns in red, white, and blue. Our television had twenty-five channels. We switched back and forth between them with a dial knob on the panel. When turned, it made a popping sound, a line creeping up the screen, taking the picture away and leaving another in its place with a tik tik. tik.

We were in Sunday school in the room behind the sanctuary. It was low-roofed and flush with thick, red carpeting, a very pious rec room. The boards were new and yellow. We breathed woodchips and fresh plastic while we sat on folding chairs.

ÒGod is everywhere, Ó Reverend Tolliver said. ÒHe can see everything you do. Anything nasty canŌt ever be kent secret. Ó

We didn'ôt need to hear it from him. Aron gave us the rundown during snack hour, reciting everything his papaw, the Rev, mentioned at home: if we stole quarters from our moms' purses to play Street Fighter on the Walmart console, God could see it. If we cussed on the bus, He could see it. If we made fun of Alvin Back, who was born with one leg shorter than the other and walked with a limp, He could see it. And if you played with yourself, God saw that, especially. Evidently one of Aron'Ös older brothers tried to sneak a *Penthouse* up to his room, and the Rev intercepted, taking the opportunity to inform them all that touching your wiener was a one-way pass to ultimate damnation.

I hit my growth spurt first and shot up a full two heads above Aron and James Mark, making me the tallest in class. I assumed this was why the Rev always seemed to end up staring at me. When I complained about this to my parents, they told me I was imagining it. My brother Bryce whispered to me that it was because I had a face like a butt. I prinched him until he screamed.

The Reverend walked around when he taught Sunday school, drawing stuff on the board. He held the chalk between his fore and middle fingers like a cigarette. That day, heOd drawn a big, squiggly planet Earth. A stick man and lady held hands beside it. Aron drew, too: a stick man, then a cloud behind him that read FERT. He elbowed me.

The Rev propped his cowboy boot up on a chair. ÒBoys.Ó

Aron quit.

ÒNowÕd be the right time to remind yÕall,Ó he said, Òthat God sees all.Ó He stopped, looked around

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 2 of 8 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abar

Instructions for Failure

. lanet Renton

Conway Rides

lan Breer

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hel

us. ÒYes, he does. Absolutely he does. I can say it twice, 'cause itŌs so true.Ó We could hear him breathing through his nostrils. His belt buckle, a large cross mosaic of silver and turquoise, winked under the lights. ÒHe watches each one of yŌall to protect yŌall, but to see if youŌre following His word, too. He wonŌt ever miss you.Ó

He turned his head and gazed straight at me. I tried hard not to look down at my hands, but I did anyway.

Sermon was at eleven. We sang songs, then Reverend Tolliver got up for the sermon. I had never seen him wear a robe. Òl feel closer to the Lord God in my shirtsleeves, Ó he always said. Òl feel closer to the living God as I am, without ornament. Makes my heart grow closer to be so plain.Ó

The Rev always began quietly, with a pointiNkindness, or forgiveness, or a parable. Then he got louder and things just sort of diddled out and he began to get angry at everything. Started talking about the presidentiNonce, he ranted about Dan Quayle for an hour. He talked about formication and taxes and homosexuality and beef prices bringing on the end times. Once, he picked up someoneOs baby and held it high above his head, shaking it gently and yelling, OYouOre killing this. YouOre killing this. O The baby whined a bit and hung, its legs dangling over the comb tracks in the RevOs hair.

Church was the worst part of my week.

That monthŌs parishioner meeting was after sermon. We were all let out into the yard to play. Girls played patty-cake: Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, all dressed in black, black, black.

Aron led us to a secret pack of Chips Ahoy in the kitchen. He smacked the cookies down. ÒBoom,Ó he said. Aron was all right sometimes. A little gross, maybe. He liked to pick his nose. It was hard to keep his forefinger out of his nostril, his safety zone; for all lack of boogerage, it appeared he just liked keeping his finger warm. But he didnŐt tattle, and he didnŐt try to boss you around because he was the preacherÕs grandson.

Òls it true what your papaw said?Ó

ÒAbout what. Ó Aron struggled to look at the Gameboy over James Markos shoulder, his mouth full.

James Mark grimaced and brushed the crumbs from his shirt. His mother dressed him in suspenders and jackets.

He bunched the jacket up in his lap and used it to block his Gameboy from view during sermon. When he put the Gameboy in his back pocket, his pants sagged.

ÒAbout people. Like. Touching themselves and God watching.Ó

ÒWhy, do you touch yourself? Ó Aron leaned further. James Mark shoved him away.

ÒNo. Definitely not. I justÑÓ

ÒHe likes to touch himself, Ó James Mark sang.

ÒShut up, buttmunch.Ó

ÒCall me a buttmunch again and I wonŌt let you play.Ó

Aron scratched himself, crammed another cookie in his mouth. Òl guess. Ó My stomach sank. ÒPapaw says lots of stuff. Our other pawpawŌs awesome. He keeps Werther's in his pockets for us. Ó *Zelda* chirped from the Gameboy. ÒBut you have to touch it to wash it. It can fall off if you donŌt wash it. So I think thatŌs okay. Ó

ÒYour peterÕs not gonna fall off, stupid,Ó James Mark said.

ÒYuh huh.Ó Aron raised his eyebrows, taking on a superior look. ÒMy cousin showed me pictures. Soldiers get it. Pee has acid in it and you have to pee it out quick or itŌll burn your wiener off.Ó

James Mark rolled his eyes. Aron had a thing for details. But we goaded him. We milked him on a regular basis for specifics of Hell: what it was like, what happened to you when you got there. Aron rarely failed to disappoint: your limbs were ripped apart by bulls with scales, devils took little pins and stuck them into your eyeballs one by one until your eyes were big, watery pin sunflowers. Then he started to make up stupid stuff: you were forced to eat HitlerÖs snot, monsters shoved pool cues and bananas up your butt.

ÒHe didnÕt say that.Ó

ÒYeah he did. DonÕt go callin' me a liar.Ó

The idea of Hell didnÖt bother Aron much. For a preacherÖs grandkid, he agonized very little over damnation before he went to sleep at night. He was comfortable with the unseen. He had, for example, a penchant for playing roly-poly down the hill at recess without checking for rocks or brambles or cows first. He would just lie on his back and fold his arms over his chest, closing his eyes for the launch. To him, his papawÖs sermons

were awesome stories relegated to the part of his mind that stored back episodes of *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Joe Bob Briggs Monstervision*. AronÖs God and AronÖs Bible were precisely that: one big, elaborate episode of *Monstervision*. He told Bryce and me stories about the haints who walked the train tracks below our house, zombie miners mad about getting buried alive, hungry for brains. Aron claimed being underground for so long had zombiefied them.

We tried to laugh it off. James Mark said that Aron was so full of shit he could sneeze skid marks. But Bryce and I fought over whose turn it was to take the trashcans down the hill, both afraid to be the one to go into the dark.

Aron jumped up. ÒLetÕs roll down the hill.Ó

James Mark made a face. ÒYou go.Ó

I shook my head.

ÖScrew you girls, Ó he said, and ran for the slope. This was in the mountains: medians and road sides lined with rock walls that gushed in wet seasons and froze in the winters, pretty January rivulets caught in mid-flow. Half of us lived on a mountaintop. Our church sat at the head of a very large incline, at the top of which Aron laid down, tucked his hands to his sides, and kicked off. His body became a pale blur as he spun down, the incline going steeper, steeper. It seemed to take him forever to roll to a stop.

One of the old ladies emerged from the parishioners meeting and began herding us back inside. ÒAron,Ó she screeched, Òyou get up right now 'fore you break your neck.Ó

James Mark crammed the Gameboy into his back pocket and hitched up his pants. ÒYou need to relax,Ó he told me. ÒYouÖre always talking about Hell. TheyÖre just trying to scare us.Ó

ÒBut why would someone do that?Ó

He shrugged. Öl dunno. Look at Aron.Ó He nodded to where Aron was limping up the hill, smeared with grass stains. He grabbed the last cookie and stomped the tray into the garbage, laugh-spraying crumbs all over himself. ÖHe listens to that stuff all the time at home. Does he look worried?Ó

Aron looked up, saw us. Gave us the finger.

ÒYou worry too much, Ó James Mark said.







Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

This was the year we all had to take DARE in class. We learned about druggery in DARE. That Õs what Officer Anderson called it. Druggery.

None of us knew what crack or angel dust were. Those of us whood been able to sneak around our parents and watch *Scarface* knew about cocaine, at least a little bit. Officer Anderson brought a suitcase full of drugs to class one day, labeled like a bug collection. He pointed out each one, lingering weirdly over the morning glory seeds, discussing the contours of the mushrooms, skating pretty fast over marijuana. A lot of us had already seen that at Brian Tolson os house. His dad left buds lying on the coffee table next to the channel changer. Mr. Tolson called them buds, like they were old friends of his.

That day at lunch, Aron tried to snort salt like it was cocaine. ÒSay hello to my little friend!Ó he yelled. After, he cried and pawed at his nose. When he puked, he got to go home.

Dad did Officer AndersonÕs taxes. ÒHow are you liking DARE?Ó he asked at dinner that night.

At Brian TolsonÖs house, his mother brought her Pabst Blue Ribbon to the table. They ate while watching television. My parents kept no liquor in their house. They did not smoke. They spoke quietly to each other. Most foods on our plates were muted shades of green, brown, and white. We always had a bread product. Dad adjusted his glasses over his gray, looked at me.

ÒltÕs okay.Ó

ÒLearning some good stuff?Ó

Òl guess so, yeah.Ó

ÒWhat did you learn about today?Ó

ÒAngel dust.Ó

Òl donÕt know what that is,Ó my mother said.

Dad shrugged and picked up his fork. ÒSome drug people use to get high.Ó

ÒWell, Ó Mom said, Òl think itŌs a great idea, this DARE program. Especially for you boys. ItŌs the boys you have to watch against the dangerous things. Ó She coughed softly. No one gave a signal they had heard her.

Bryce was across the table from me chewing bread with his front teeth. ÒYouŌre gonna be a junkie when you grow up, Ó he said, sticking his tongue out. A damp lump of bread fell gray on the table.

ÒShut up, Ó I said.

ÒHe said a bad word, Ó Bryce cried, pointing.

ÒYou spit food on the table.Ó

Dad put his fork down. ÒYou eat that bread,Ó he told Bryce, then turned to me. ÒDonŌt ever tell anyone to shut up.Ó

ÒThatÕs right, Ó Mom said. ÒltÕs so rude. Ó We looked at our plates.

I was a clean child. My hair and nails were trimmed. The house was two stories with a staircase and a polished banister. Floors were swept, surfaces rubbed, furniture settled at right angles. I was provided for, but I could not help but take anxiety into myself. Dinosaurs, for instance. When every other boy in the first grade loved dinosaurs, wore clothing with dinosaurs, ripped into T-Rex sheet cakes at birthday parties, I was terrified of themIN creatures I imagined as big or bigger than my townOs perimeters, too huge to live for long. We were told in science class that fuel came from the remains of prehistoric dinosaurs, the rich, ancient void threaded with coal. I dreamt of

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 3 of 8 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abar

Instructions for Failure

Ignot Ronton

Conway Rides

lan Breen

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell Kayla Rae Whitaker

Ar

the dinosaurs waking up, angry that people were building on top of them, driving up and down their spines. I imagined them unfurling tails longer than the interstate and uprooting schools and Walmarts, mashing their feet, sending little kid blood running into the creek.

My father was an accountant, a man to whom everything lay in columns of right and wrong, lesser and more, ordinal and subsequent. He shook his head and looked weirdly disappointed when I asked him about the dinosaur bones in the mountains, much as heÖd looked when I confessed to him that I was afraid of the zombies on the railroad tracks. ÖThatÖs ridiculous,Ó he said. ÖThereÖs nothing there. What you see is what is there. And thatÖs it.Ó

Our mother kept the house. Like most other mothers we knew, she seemed to talk more than Dad and say less. ÖStop being silly, Ó she echoed him on the dinosaur issue. ÖGood gracious, honey. Dinosaurs arenÔt even real. You should know that. Ó

God was the only thing our father insisted was there without the benefit of solid proof. Dinner always began with a short, stern prayer, a request that the Lord keep us safe. We started all our dinners this way: with a plea to something we couldnot see for salvation from things we couldnot imagine while my mind flashed unwittingly on the lady in the slip, the arch of her back, the noise she made.

Sometimes I sat at the table with my parents and brother and I watched their heads tilted forward over their plates. I could see their hairlines, the smooth peak in their foreheads wrinkle when they chewed, and the blood in me would cry out, wanting to believe the lie, force the admission: yes, I belonged here.

<<12**3**45678>>





Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

I stayed in bed the rest of the day. Dad carried the little TV from the kitchen to my bedroom so I could play Nintendo. He fed me cans of Sprite through a straw. ÒCan I have Mountain Dew?Ó

ÒToo much sugar. You need to rest.Ó He felt my forehead. Watched me lose a round of Dr. Mario. ÒSo you stack the pills by color?Ó

ÒYeah, like Tetris. Stack them to get rid of them.Ó

He studied me through his glasses. His church shirt was untucked from his pants. Only the first button was loose, revealing a skim of clean white undershirt. Òl donŌt think you have the flu,Ó he said.

I didnÕt say anything. He looked back at the television screen, then at me again. ÒYour mom seems to think you boys were eating cookies in the church kitchen last week. Is she right?Ó

ÒYeah. But we didnÕt do it this week.Ó

He looked at me.

ÒlÕm sorry.Ó

ÒJust so long as you donŌt do it again.Ó He pushed his glasses up his nose. We both looked at the TV screen. ÒAnything else bothering you?Ó

The way he sat by me, so neutral, only the faintest sun lines around his eyes and mouth. His hair that shade of brown so middling you could barely put a name to it. When he helped me with my math homework, he smelled like Head and Shoulders and pennies. He put his hand on my shoulder.

ÒSometimes I wonder if lÕm really a good person or not.Ó

ÒWhat makes you say that?Ó

Òl donŌt know. I worry that if I die, I could go to Hell. And what itŌs like. Like having hot pokers jammed up Nuo your nose, and stuff. Everything Reverend Tolliver talks about.Ó

Dad exhaled loudly and stared at the wall in thought. Ol donOt recall Reverend Tolliver saying anything about hot pokers up the nose.O

ÒAron said he said it.Ó

ÒSon, AronÕs not a pastor. HeÕs a boy who likes to make up stories. DonÕt encourage him.Ó

ÒBut what if heÕs right?Ó

Dad settled his chin on top of his hand. ÒlÖll tell you what. I think youÖre just fine as you are. I think youÖre a good person. I think itÖs important to try to be a good person. Trying is the most important thing. If you fail, you get it right the next time. But if you feel youÖve done something wrong, with the cookies or with something else, then confess it in prayer. ThatÖs what Jesus is there for.Ó

ÒWhat if I still go to Hell?Ó

ÒThe way you ore talking, you od think you were set on going there. Ó He straightened his glasses and smiled, a little huff of air passing his lips. The closest he usually ever came to laughing. Ol think the best thing to do is not to worry about the Hell stuff. Just focus on goodness. Being good to other people. Living a good life. Ó

It sounded too simple, but what I felt was not simple. That was the problem. I could have told him more. About the dinosaurs, and druggery, and "The Red Shoe Diaries." I could have tried to tell him about this terrible thing with veins that went all the way down inside me. But I lost my nerve.

l said, Òokay.Ó

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work

<< Page 5 of 8 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Instructions for Failure

Janet Bentor

Conway Rides

lan Breen

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of Hell Kayla Rae Whitaker



Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 6 of 8 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Instructions for Failure

Conway Rides

Recovery and Rehabilitation

No More Nickemackin'

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

Next Sunday, Aron fired up his weekly accounting of Bizzaroworld Hell details while James Mark hunched over his new Game Gear. Aron elbowed me, grinning. On Hell, thereOs no bathroom. You just have to hold it in until you explode. And the other guys have to hold it, too, and when they explode, you get hit with their poop. And in Hell, you have to eat old cigarettes. And you have to lick catÕs butts. Like on a conveyor belt. And you have to

ÒAron, shut up .Ó I socked his shoulder. It surprised me, and it surprised him. ÒNo one wants to hear what you have to say about Hell anymore, okay? WeÕve heard your stupid stories before.Ó

Aron stepped back and regarded me, a little shocked but recalculating, trying to figure out how best to get at me. He rubbed his shoulder, staring, then dropped his voice. Whispered, ÒyouÕre a fucker.Ó

I stared at him. James Mark looked up from his Game Gear

ÒFucker. Ó And then he ran, looking behind him, expecting me to chase him. I put my hands in my pockets and watched him head for the hillside, arms pumping, dumb paisley tie flapping over his shoulder, and reach the ledge where the slope became a hill, the spot from which you launched if you wanted a good, smooth roll with a lot of speed, tucking yourself best you could in the shape of a plank. He lay flat on his back, hands pressed to his sides.

ÒGuess you told him, Ó James Mark said.

We watched Aron kick off, his pink shirt a bright spot against the cold, one of those damp sepia days before Christmas. We watched him flash belly, back, belly, back, and one of the Bible study ladies stuck her head out the door and yelled that it was time to come in for service, and we heard, Owhere is Aron Tolliver? O We saw her come out the door and look over the ridge to see Aron bumping down, and she shouted, ÖAron Tolliver, you get up here right now! YouÕre gonna ruin your dothes!Ó

We looked back at Aron, saw him spin clean and fast, his body seeming to levitate one moment, and the next, his head jerk the wrong wayNa slight angle, but hard enough for his hair to give one yellow jounce. And the moment following, his body slackened, his hands loosened from his sides, his legs and tangled, and he was no longer rolling, but falling.

The lady yelled his name once more, questioning, then ran to the hillside, stumbling as she took the slope, chasing him to the bottom.

<< 12345**6**78>>

🖸 SHARE 🚜 😭 🔣 ...)

ISSN 2325-0380 | @ 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117













Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

They took Aron in a helicopter to Knoxville. He didn'Ot come back to school that week, or the next. He wasn'Ot at church, either. The Reverend scared us all by turning into a ghost overnight, his belly going loose and fatty, something that dragged instead of pushed forward, his hair losing its weird glow. His sermons were quieter; one Sunday talking about Paul'Os letters to the Corinthians, his voice broke and he had to stop.

The Sunday after Christmas, we came to church to find a fence in front of the slope. There were whispers from AronÖs cousins, rumors that spread all over the church yard, that Aron had been brought back to the hospital in town. HeÖd woken up from the coma, but the fall had caused some sort of brain damage. The doctors told his parents that he would not be able to walk or talk again. It was one of AronÖs girl cousins who told us, a middle schooler who kept her arms folded tight across her chest. When asked, she said, ÖHeÖll be retarded.Ó What did that mean, exactly? ÖCanÖt take care of himself. Just retarded.Ó

This made my stomach surge. James Mark slowly slid his Game Gear into his back pocket.

After sermon, our mother came to us and said, Òwould you two like to visit Aron in the hospital?Ó

Bryce and I looked at each other, neither of us wanting to be the one to say no.

ÒTheyŐre allowing visitors now that heŐs back. Reverend says AronŐs real eager to see his friends from church. Why donŐt we go?Ó

The Rev limped over to us, hair flapping. ÒWhatÖd they say,Ó he boomed to Mom, grinning weakly. He looked down at me. Òl bet theyŌre on board. What do you say, boys?Ó He clapped me on the shoulder. I looked down.

We followed the RevÕs Chevy to Central Baptist East. He led us inside to the second floor, Christmas wreaths and a spinning, blinking tree against the smell of bleach and urine, to a room at the end of the hall. A curtain was drawn around the bed. A nurse wearing blue rubber gloves emerged. ÒAronŌs getting his bath right now. HeŌll be done in just a minute.Ó

We stood in the hallway, Dad and the Rev speaking in low tones, the Rev running his fingers over his nose and grabbing the end, over and over. He sighed and turned. I heard Nashville: something about moving Aron down there, to a specialist. Our mother nodded vigorously. She reached out to grasp BryceÖs shoulders, stopping him in mid-fidget. She took my head, petting hard. Bryce and I froze, gave each other looks. Knew that this meant something and whatever it was, it made us afraid and we noticed for the first time that our mother was a good half-foot shorter than Dad.

And then the curtain was opened, and the nurse came out and announced that we could go in. And the Rev strode through first with, Öhey there, bubby, Ó and Dad stepped in after, hands in pockets, and then Mom, herding us in front of her, whispering, Ògo on, Ó and we could see AronŌs feet first, limp and white, heels splayed. Completely still. I stopped.

ÒGo on. Ó Mom pushed her hand into my back.

Bryce looked sidelong at me. If I bolted, he would, too.

The Rev sat at the side of the bed, cradling a small, pale kid hooked to ten different machines. Wires bandaged into his arms, cords taped to his chest, one disappearing into a hole in his throat, another hooked to his nose. He was more wire than kid. TheyÖd shaved his head. His hands were folded into his chest, wing-like.

ÒBubby, Ó the Rev said, his arms around him, lifting him into something close to a sitting position.

Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Pre><Previous Work Next Work >

<< Page 7 of 8 >>

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Cezarija Abari

Instructions for Failure

Janet Benton

Conway Rides

lan Breen

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Jessica Langan-Peck

No More Nickemackin'

Peter Oboum

Specifics of He

Kayla Rae Whitake

ÒBubby, look at whoÕs here. Your friends came to see you.Ó

Aron opened his mouth, wide as if to speak, then wider, wider. He showed his teeth. He made a loud honking sound. He lifted a hand toward his face, crumpled. It went to his nose. Plucked. His eyes rolled to the ceiling. ONow, bubby, O the Rev said, and gently took his hand away.

Bryce and I stood at the foot, watched the Rev produce a towel and wipe AronÖs chin. Aron shifted his eyes, just for a moment, in our direction, then turned them upward, focusing on a space above our heads.

We walked to the car in silence. When my stomach threatened to erupt, I shoved my fist in and swallowed hard as I could. Dad leaned in and patted my shoulder. ÔYou okay?Ó

ÒFine. Ó I said.

We were eating pot roast for dinner in the clothes weOd changed into, chewing and staying quiet, when Mom dipped her head close to her plate and started shaking. We froze, not sure what was happening, until she lifted her head and showed us her face, red and crumpled. She gasped for air. Ol just. I just. I just. O Dad rose and said, OMarilyn. O And she said, Ol just. I canOt. O

Dad put his arms around her and helped her upstairs. Bryce and I looked at each other, too shocked to say anything.

Mom stayed upstairs the rest of the night, alternating between quiet and choked, heaving sobs. Animal noises. I passed their bedroom once and saw her curied on her side, hands cupping her face.

ÒGo back to your room, Ó Dad told me, putting on his jacket and heading for the front door.

ÒWhere are you going?Ó

 $\verb|\dot{O}Just running over to see Dr. Nicholls next door for a minute. Don \~Ot go outside. Tell Bryce the same. \'Ot of the same of the same$

Òls Mom okay?Ó

ÒEverythingÕs fine. Just stay put.Ó

He was back within the hour, touching me on the head when he passed as if to make sure I was still there. He stepped into the bedroom and drew an orange bottle from his pocket, shook out a single pill. Picked up the glass of water at my mother 0s bedside and held both out to her, telling her to drink, and I looked at the pill and thought, druggery.

<< 1 2 3 4 5 6 **7** 8 >>



Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

<Previous Work

Next Work >

<< Page 8 of 8

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

Charon

Instructions for Failure

Conway Rides

Recovery and Rehabilitation

No More Nickemackin'

Specifics of Hell

Kayla Rae Whitaker

The summer before college, James Mark picked me up and we went to Brian TolsonÕs for a party. In a month I would be at college, a math major from the time I entered until graduation, just like my father. I told myself I wanted to do something more theoretical with my math, take leaps of imagination with what I did. But it was not in me to do so. I organized everything into lists: choosing one school against another, one girl against another. When I masturbated, I stacked the magazines at right angles before placing them back under the mattress. Later, I would welcome the change to digital. Much neater. The only cleanup would be the actual cleanup.

At BrianOs we were drinking beers in the living room when BrianOs mom came hunched out of the bathroom that still smelled of vanilla hand lotion and Virginia Slims, crying and holding the cordless phone to her chest. She said. ÒAron Tolliver died today.Ó.

We had done our best not to think or talk about Aron after the accident, about him being transferred from bed to wheelchair and him staying there. Seeing his eyes go unfocused and his hands turn into claws, and seeing him develop a dribble that never seemed to cease. He went from squirting ranch dressing at us to sitting at the special ed table, where a teacher fed him applesauce. It was worse than if heÖd moved away; the kid weÖd known who was funny-mean and administered painful wet willies and liked to draw boobs. It was worse, because we wondered if he was still in there, somewhere, trapped. At Jennifer FosterÖs thirteenth birthday party, his mom wheeled him in and he sat in his wheelchair by the grownups, head tilting uneasily on his neck, occasionally making a sound. The rest of us had been fired up about this party, which included girls, and music, and the potential for touching the girls. But seeing Aron like that, knowing that he was going to be like this forever, that he would never touch a girl or go to college, put that fire right out so that, for the rest of the night, we wished feverishly to leave, and we stared into space and kicked rocks around outside or ate our cake as fast as possible, wishing for our parents to pick us up and take us home.

BrianÕs mom blotted her eyes with a Kleenex. ÒYÕall are all blessings,Ó she said, grabbing BrianÕs head and pushing her fingers through his hair while he grimaced and drained the rest of his Rolling Rock. ÒYŌall got your whole lives ahead of you.Ó

I caught James MarkÕs eye. We both knew it was true.

<< 12345678

🖸 SHARE 📑 😭 🔣 ...

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117

report your Duotrope



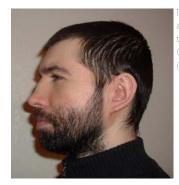








Dmitry Borshch



Dmitry Borshch was born in Dnepropetrovsk, studied in Moscow, and today lives in New York. His paintings have been exhibited at the National Arts Club (New York), Brecht Forum (New York), ISE Cultural Foundation (New York), and the State Russian Museum (Saint Petershum)

Contributions to Switchback

Issue 18: Rising

Daughters of the Dust

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117









Daughters of the Dust

Dmitry Borshch



Issue 18 Rising

Fall 2013

Next Work > <Pre><Previous Work

Nonfiction

Poetry

Fiction

To the Sun

A Journey

Manifestation

Taking Flight

🟮 SHARE 📑 😭 🚮 ...)

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117

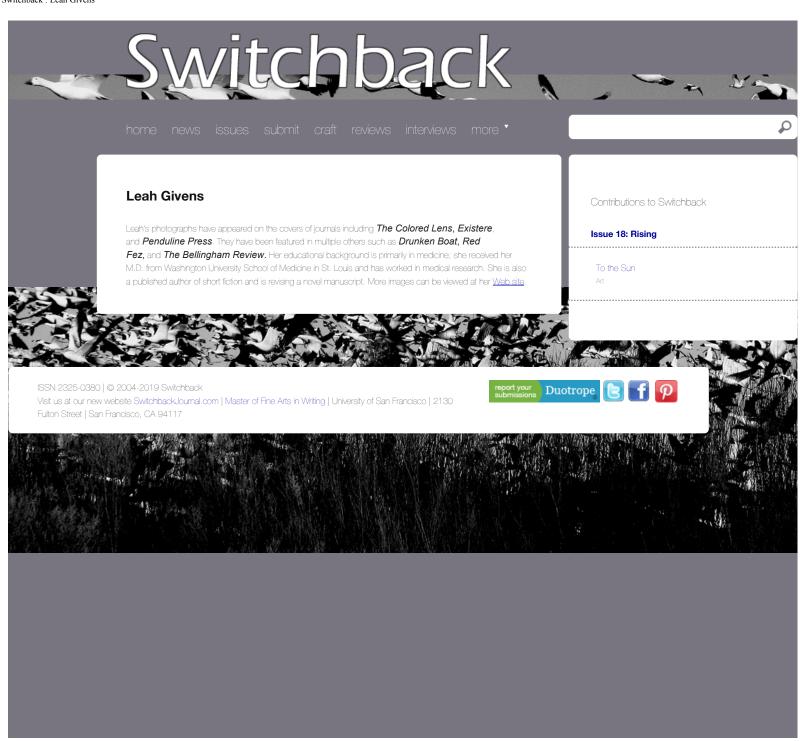
report your Duotrope

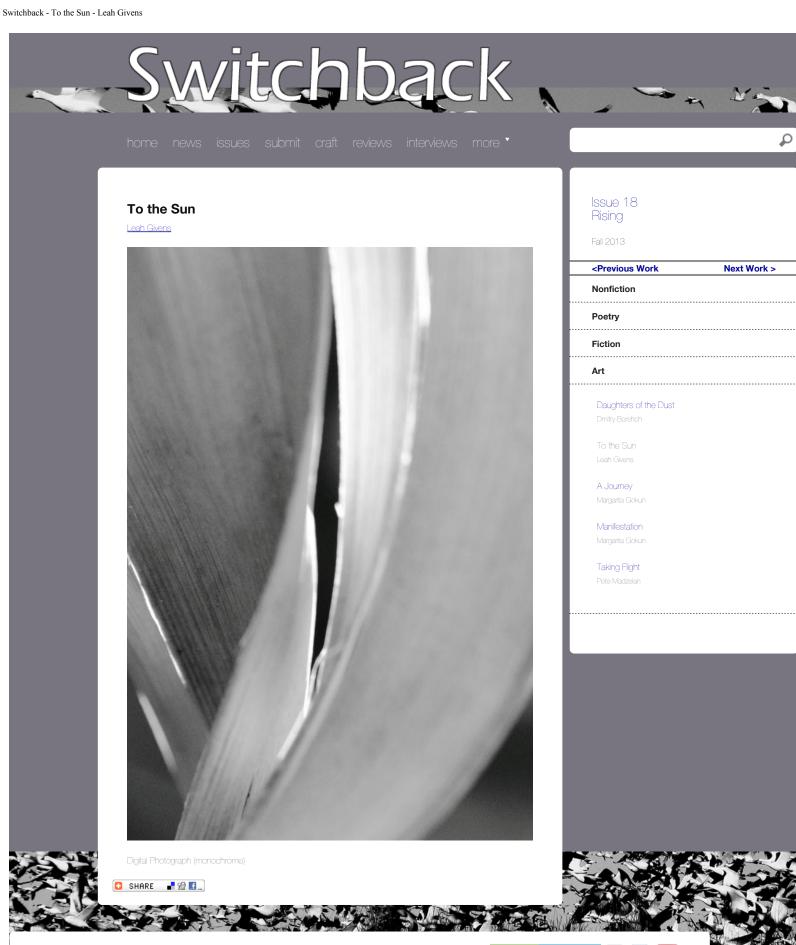












rt your Duotrope

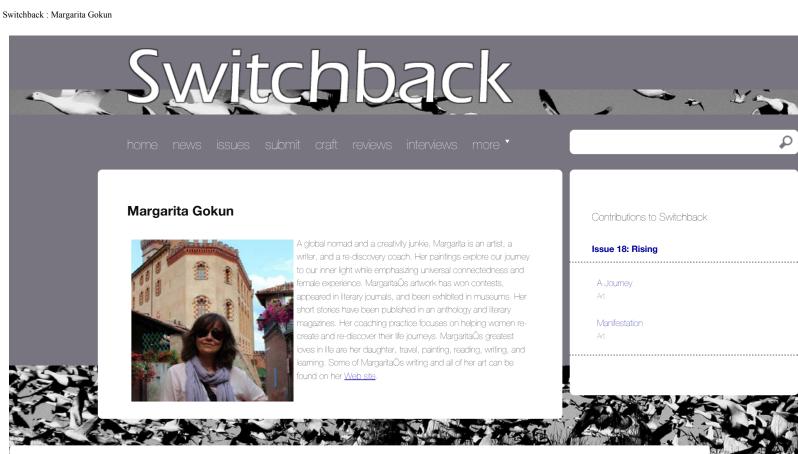
TERRAL SECTION OF THE PROPERTY OF THE PROPERTY

http://swback.com/issues/018/sun.html[7/13/20, 1:49:55 AM]

Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117

ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback

Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130







Manifestation

Taking Flight

🖸 SHARE 🚜 😭 🚮 ...) ISSN 2325-0380 | © 2004-2019 Switchback t your Duotrope Visit us at our new website SwitchbackJournal.com | Master of Fine Arts in Writing | University of San Francisco | 2130 Fulton Street | San Francisco, CA 94117

